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Te Tūtaki:
Place, Time, Biculturalism and the Postmodern
in the work of Shane Cotton, 2000-2012

Jessica Jones

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in Art History,
The University of Auckland,
2013
Abstract

This thesis explores the art of Shane Cotton during the period of 2000 to 2012, focusing on four major themes that are shown to be central to his art practice during this time. These themes are place, time, biculturalism and the postmodern. A theme-based approach is preferred because Cotton’s art does not progress in a linear, chronological fashion over the course of the decade, but rather he continually explores and revisits concepts in a thematic way.

The thesis examines specific aspects of Cotton’s artistic content within each of the broader themes. Expression of identity is shown to be closely related to Cotton’s portrayal of place, which is also used to explore differing cultural ways of relating to place. His chosen medium of painting is analysed as an element of time in his work both in its making and in reception; while his explorations of religious hybridity, along with the use of dual languages in his paintings, are found to be elements of the unique biculturalism of Aotearoa New Zealand. Lastly, Cotton’s regular practice of appropriation is explored as a typically postmodern mode of image-making.

The themes are also shown to all be closely related with one another, giving Cotton’s art practice a unified conceptual basis. The locating of his works in a certain place ties in to historical narratives of biculturalism, while the paintings that display an ambiguity of place and time illustrate a postmodern negation of narrative. Cotton’s subversion of the dominant unbalanced dynamic of biculturalism in Aotearoa New Zealand and his use of incoherency also relates to postmodern critiques of imperialism and singular truth.

This thesis finds that above all, Shane Cotton is a painter of symbols and signs. Accordingly, each of the four themes is initially discussed in terms of how he portrays the thematic concepts through the use of symbolic imagery. It is shown that these symbols and signs, although broadly pertaining to the outlined themes, are ultimately ambiguous and can be interpreted in a variety of different ways, which situates Cotton within the larger postmodern theoretical context. For this reason, the final chapter explores postmodernism both as a theme within Cotton’s work and also as the broad structure that underpins his art as whole.
Acknowledgements

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Many thanks also to Hamish Miles for all his help given me in ways too numerous to list, throughout the writing of this thesis and the years of study leading up to it.

And lastly, I thank my mum.
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# Glossary

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<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Aotearoa</td>
<td>North Island - now used as the Māori name for New Zealand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>atua</td>
<td>god, deity, ancestor with continuing influence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hapū</td>
<td>kinship group, subtribe.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iwi</td>
<td>extended kinship group, tribe, nation, people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kōtuku</td>
<td>white heron, <em>Egretta alba</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kōwhaiwhai</td>
<td>painted scroll ornamentation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kupu</td>
<td>word.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mana</td>
<td>prestige, authority, status, power, charisma.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>manaia</td>
<td>stylised figure used in carving.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>marae</td>
<td>courtyard - the open area in front of the whareni. Often also used to include the complex of buildings around the marae.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maunga</td>
<td>mountain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>moko</td>
<td>Māori tattooing designs on the face or body.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nākahī</td>
<td>serpent, snake.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ngāti Hine</td>
<td>an iwi with a rohe in Te Tai Tokerau, Northland.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ngā Puhi</td>
<td>a major iwi of Te Tai Tokerau, centred in the Hokianga, the Bay of Islands and Whāngārei.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ngāti Rangi</td>
<td>a hapū of Ngā Puhi.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pā</td>
<td>fortified village, fort, stockade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pākehā</td>
<td>New Zealander of European descent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papatuanuku</td>
<td>Earth mother and wife of Ranginui.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pīwaiwaka</td>
<td>fantail, <em>Rhipidura fuliginosa</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pou</td>
<td>post, pole, pillar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rangatira</td>
<td>chief (male or female), leader.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rohe</td>
<td>territory of hapū and iwi.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rongopai</td>
<td>a meeting house at Waituhi, built in 1888.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tā moko</td>
<td>practice of tattooing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tangata whenua</td>
<td>local people, hosts, indigenous people of the land - people born of the whenua, i.e. of the placenta and of the land where the people's ancestors have lived and where their placenta are buried.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tapu</td>
<td>sacred, forbidden, restriction - a supernatural condition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Te Ao Māori</td>
<td>the Māori world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Te Aupōuri</td>
<td>an iwi with a rohe north of Kaitaia, Northland.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Te Paipera Tapu</td>
<td>The Holy Bible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Te reo Māori</td>
<td>the Māori language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Te Uri Taniwha</td>
<td>a hapū of Ngā Puhi.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tohunga</td>
<td>skilled person, expert, priest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>toi moko (also moko mōkai)</td>
<td>tattooed preserved head - done for two reasons, either to venerate a loved one, or as a trophy of war to ridicule an enemy. In the nineteenth century toi moko were traded with Pākehā in exchange for muskets and gunpowder.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tui</td>
<td>parson bird, Prosthemadera novaeseelandiae.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tūrangawaewae</td>
<td>domicile, place where one has rights of residence and belonging through kinship and whakapapa.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tūtaki</td>
<td>meeting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>uenuku</td>
<td>rainbow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>upoko tuhituhi</td>
<td>drawn head – a representation of an toi moko.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>whakairo</td>
<td>carving.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>whakapapa</td>
<td>genealogy, lineage, descent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wharenui</td>
<td>meeting house, large house - main building of a marae. Traditionally the wharenui belonged to a hapū or whānau but modern meeting houses have been built for non-tribal groups, such as schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>whānau</td>
<td>family group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>whenua</td>
<td>land, nation, state, ground, placenta</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

The standing of Shane Cotton as an artist, both in New Zealand and internationally, has consistently grown since his emergence in the late 1980s. Aside from his many exhibitions shown throughout New Zealand, he has also held solo exhibitions in Melbourne and Sydney, and more recently in London. In 2003, just 15 years into Cotton’s professional career, a retrospective exhibition of his work was held at the Wellington City Gallery (with a comprehensive accompanying catalogue), which then travelled to the Auckland Art Gallery. A survey exhibition of such scope, usually reserved for well established and accomplished artists mid- to late-career, shows the level of impact Cotton had on the Australasian art world.

Since then, his work has featured in major art events all over the world, including Spain and New York, and is now held in most large public collections in New Zealand as well as in the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, and the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. He has been given several significant awards and honours, including being named an Arts Foundation of New Zealand Laureate in 2008, and an Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit in 2012.

But despite these considerable achievements to date, there has been relatively little academic writing about his work. Aside from the catalogue from his 2003 survey exhibition, which featured many in-depth essays by esteemed writers including Lara Strongman and Blair French, there has been one master’s thesis by Shelley Bishop-Jahnke, also from 2003, and a number of exhibition catalogue essays and articles about his art in various journals. This thesis aims to add to the scholarship on Cotton’s work of the last decade, by both analysing its content and style and then situating it within its broader theoretical context. The first three chapters will each cover one broad theme that is prevalent throughout Cotton’s artwork of the period 2000 – 2012, namely: place, time, and biculturalism. The last chapter will discuss his work in relation to postmodernism, specifically with regards to the meaning(s) of his work and its reception. In order to clarify the relevance of each of these four themes, it is important to give the background of his development up until this point.
Shane Cotton was born in Upper Hutt in 1964 to a Pākehā mother and a Māori father of Ngāpuhi descent (Ngāti Rangi, Ngāti Hine and Te Uri Taniwha).¹ He studied Fine Arts at the University of Canterbury, graduating in 1988, and then earned a Diploma in Teaching in 1991, which lead him to become a lecturer in the Maori Visual Arts programme at Massey University until 2003. His first exhibitions out of art school displayed a biomorphic style, with cellular structures influenced by American artist Terry Winters, but teaching in the Māori department sparked an interest in issues of post-colonialism and biculturalism.² This led to his drastic change in style to the now iconic sepia-toned paintings, incorporating Maori imagery from the Rongopai wharenui, the life of Te Kooti and the Ringatū faith. Shelley Bishop-Jahnke wrote a comprehensive account in her thesis of Cotton’s development from a largely Eurocentric art style immediately after his studies, through to a broadly Māori ideological framework, and lastly to a Ngāpuhi, and specifically Ngāti Rangi focussed art practice that was often emphatically situated in Ohaeawai, Cotton’s ancestral tūrangawaewae.³

Throughout his early career, Cotton developed a wide visual lexicon of signs and symbols taken from a myriad of sources: Māori and Pākehā, local, national and international, historical and contemporary, from both popular culture and fine art, the trivial, the contentious and the taboo alike. These symbols were utilised in the early 1990s to explore issues of land ownership and confiscation, oppressive government laws and policies, and differences between Māori and Pākehā worldviews. Later Cotton used them to identify himself as from a specific place and people: the Ngāti Rangi hapū of Taiāmai.

This practice affirms Cotton as a painter of signs and symbols. His lexicon of symbolic imagery has evolved and expanded enormously since his career began, but constants can also identified. He often uses symbols to explore place, time, and biculturalism in many varying ways, which will be discussed in the first three chapters. But these symbols, including words, also give rise to a myriad of possible meanings, making it impossible for there to be just one ‘true’ interpretation for a Shane Cotton painting. It is this element of his work that will be analysed in terms of postmodernist theory in the final chapter.

In discussing these four themes it must be stressed that this thesis is only one of many possible approaches to Cotton’s work, and although my interpretations are grounded in research and visual analysis, they are still necessarily subjective and heavily influenced by my own background as a Pākehā woman with only a beginner’s understanding of Te Reo and Te Ao Māori. As such, I realise that my views may not resonate with others of a different background. I accept my limitations and welcome future discourse.

The first chapter of this thesis, ‘Painting Place,’ will outline the ways in which Taiāmai is alluded to in the works of the early 2000s, to establish how firmly Cotton had situated himself there at the beginning of that decade. The various motifs and stylistic characteristics of work from this period will be traced throughout his later development, showing that even as the work is based less and less in Taiāmai, Cotton still retains his roots there and reprises this place in his work occasionally. Discussion of place as either explicitly or implicitly evoked in works, or in some as not evoked at all, will also feature along with an analysis of how this relates to space. Varying ideas of place according to Māori and Pākehā worldviews will be examined as they relate to the expression of Cotton’s identity.

The second chapter, ‘Moving Through Time,’ will link time with place, as one cannot exist without the other – as explained in scientific theories of physics that have interested Cotton and influenced several series of his paintings. Cotton’s exploration of past, present, and future will be discussed, with a focus on the works that feature all tenses simultaneously. This unification of time will show how Cotton expresses the Māori notion of cyclical rather than linear time. Lastly, the nature of painting as an inherently time-based and traditional medium will be discussed in terms of both the making and viewing of Cotton’s artwork.

The third chapter, ‘Biculturalism in Aotearoa New Zealand,’ will explore the extensive theme of biculturalism that runs through much of Cotton’s art. This is also strongly tied to time (as the current bicultural dynamic is a result of historical events) and also place (the unique biculturalism of New Zealand, which resulted from the specific combination of Māori and Pākehā people here in Aotearoa). The symbolism that Cotton uses to express biculturalism will be analysed, along with particular aspects of bicultural society frequently referenced in Cotton’s paintings. These include the hybrid merging of religious beliefs and practices that Cotton has termed bispirituality, and the effects of
literacy on an oral cultural explored through bilingualism. The use of language and text in his paintings and the effects this has on their reception will then be discussed.

The fourth and final chapter, ‘Shane Cotton and the Postmodern,’ will examine the change in Cotton’s approach towards meaning and interpretation of his art, specifically the move away from a particular, precise narrative located firmly in a given place, to a more open discourse where meanings are determined by each viewer. This will be analysed within the theory of postmodernism, in which a distrust of authorial truth and singular narrative was fostered. Cotton’s practice of appropriating imagery from a wide variety of sources will also be discussed in relation to the postmodernist critique of originality and ownership of images.
I
Painting Place

And when we had passed beyond
into the secret place and were clasped
by the titanic shadows of the earth,
all was transfigured, all was redeemed

- A.R.D. Fairburn

During the early 1990s, the work of Shane Cotton became increasingly focussed on aspects of Māori culture and history, as Cotton explored his own Māori heritage. This heritage was strongly tied to notions of place, which concurrently began to feature in his paintings. His now iconic ‘sepia-toned’ phase of 1993-1996 referred to broadly Māori issues of colonisation, loss of land, and suppression under a European government with imagery based on century-old Māori figurative paintings in East Coast meeting houses. A shift from this general Māori viewpoint to that of a specific iwi and hapū followed, as he began to “locate and define his identity as Ngā Puhi and Ngāti Rangi.” Shane Cotton is a member of the Ngā Puhi sub tribes of Ngāti Rangi, Ngāti Hine and Te Uri Taniwha, and his tūrangawaewae, or ancestral home, is Taiāmai in Te Tai Tokerau, Northland.

References to Taiāmai appeared in his paintings from 1996, but the shift from pantribal to hapū-centric content occurred most decisively during Cotton’s year as the receiver of the Francis Hodgkins fellowship in Dunedin, 1998. This fellowship culminated in a 1999 exhibition that showcased a radical change in art style, with new motifs and symbols pertaining to Ngā Puhi and Ngāti Rangi narrative and a palette

2 Deidre Brown and Ngarino Ellis, Te Puna: Māori Art from Te Tai Tokerau Northland (Auckland: Reed Books, 2007), 72.
4 Brown and Ellis, Te Puna, 72.
5 Ibid., 74.
dominated by black. Shelley Bishop-Jahnke’s 2003 thesis, “Tuakiri: Shane Cotton in the pursuit of identity,” traces this development in detail, concluding that the progression of his work into paintings that are firmly located in Taiāmai of Te Tai Tokerau occurred alongside his own discovery of his personal identity as Ngāti Rangi, with Taiāmai as his ancestral homeland.

The artworks that are most strongly situated in this specific place were painted between 1998-2001, and since this time, place has remained a strong theme in Cotton’s practice, although it has evolved throughout the decade. The Oxford Dictionary gives the primary definition of the noun ‘place’ as “a particular position, point, or area in space; a location.” Shane Cotton is a painter of place: areas in space that are definite or indefinite; real or imagined; surreal, mythical, or virtual.

This chapter will firstly analyse the ways in which Cotton references real place, through the use of direct, descriptive, literal imagery, as well as indirect, discursive symbolism. The differing cultural underpinnings of these methods will be explored. Secondly, the works with a strong evocation of a specific place will be contrasted with later paintings without references to singular place, exploring Cotton’s shift from local, identity-based subject matter and specific narratives, to more ambiguous content and universality. Lastly, the relationship of place and space in painting will be discussed, and how Cotton manipulates perceptions of distance, proximity, scale and depth to reference various kinds of spaces.

Ways of painting place

Shane Cotton evokes a specific place in his paintings in many different ways, including literal renderings of land, textual references, and a range of symbols that imply a certain place through cultural associations. These techniques were all most prevalent in his works of 1998-2001, in which Cotton asserted his Ngā Puhi and Ngāti Rangi identity

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8 Ibid., 95.
by firmly locating his art in his ancestral tūrangawaewae, or homeland, of Taiāmai in Te Tai Tokerau, Aotearoa New Zealand.\textsuperscript{10}

An example from this period is Ruarangi (Fig. 1), painted in 2000. This work consists primarily of a solid black field, with a landscape along the top edge portraying hills silhouetted against a dawn sky. The presence of this landscape denotes a specific place, whether recognised or not, due to the long history in the Western art tradition of landscape painters naturalistically depicting a real place. This landscape is therefore understood as corresponding with the land formation in a certain place, and this understanding is reinforced by the labelling of two of the hills: Pouerua and Ohaeawai. However, in this case the horizon is more of a symbol of the area rather than an accurate depiction of the land’s outline. Lara Strongman has described it as “a symbolic landscape of memory”.\textsuperscript{11} Cotton has not worked from a photo in this instance, instead relying on the text to specify the place he is referring to. Both ‘Pouerua’ and ‘Ohaeawai’ refer to places within the wider region of Taiāmai. Pouerua is the name of a volcanic, cone-shaped hill near Pākaraka, which was once a pā site.\textsuperscript{12} It remains a place of great significance to Ngā Puhi\textsuperscript{13} and to Cotton’s Ngāti Rangi hapū in particular, as it is to Pouerua where Ngāti Rangi descendants trace their origins.\textsuperscript{14} Ohaeawai is Cotton’s tūrangawaewae, the name of an area in Taiāmai and of a small township close to his maunga, Maungaturoto, and also near his marae at Ngāwhā.\textsuperscript{15}

The title, ‘Ruarangi’, is also the name of a place in Northland, which is not near the Taiāmai Plains but relates to the narrative of one of Cotton’s ancestors, Maikuku. As Bishop-Jahnke explains, “due to the gravity of her tapu, Maikuku lived in isolation in a cave at Ruarangi…”\textsuperscript{16} Wiremu Wi Hongi continues this narrative, describing how Hua came to the cave to take Maikuku as his wife, and how after the birth of their first child “they moved and finally settled at Pouerua.”\textsuperscript{17} It was here that all the rest of their children

\textsuperscript{10} Robert Jahnke, “Voices Beyond the Pae.” in Shane Cotton, ed. Lara Strongman (Wellington, New Zealand: City Gallery Wellington; Victoria University Press), 10.
\textsuperscript{13} Jeffrey Sissons, Wiremu Wi Hongi and Pat Hohepa, Ngā Pūriri o Taiamai: A political history of Ngā Puhi in the inland Bay of Islands (Auckland, New Zealand: Reed Books, 2001), 80.
\textsuperscript{14} Bishop-Jahnke, “Tuakiri,” 68.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 67.
\textsuperscript{17} Sissons, Hongi and Hohepa, Ngā Pūriri o Taiamai, 71.
were born, including Rangiheketini, who would become the mother of Tupuarangi, the
eponymous ancestor of Cotton’s Ngāti Rangi hapū.\textsuperscript{18}

This clarifies the connection between Ruarangi, Pouerua and Ohaeawai, and shows how
Cotton locates Ruarangi in his ancestral homeland of Taiāmai by literally referring to
these places in the title of the work and by labelling of two of the local hills.

There are also several purely symbolic, rather than literal, elements that reinforce
this connection by indirectly referencing Taiāmai, or Te Tai Tokerau more generally. The
first is the image of a small white bird with wings outstretched, silhouetted against the
black background. This image evokes the story of Taiāmai, after which the region inland
of the Bay of Islands was named.\textsuperscript{19} Deidre Brown recounts the story, in which a large
white bird

…suddenly arrived in the area, and began to drink from a water-filled hollow in a rock,
near the modern-day town of Ōhaeawai. Kaitara, who was the local rangatira (chief), told
his people that the bird had come from Hawaiki, their ancestral homeland. He said that the
bird had been delivered to them by the winds of Tangaroa (god of the sea), and for that
reason it should be known as ‘Taiāmai’, meaning ‘towards us from the sea’. Although
according to Kaitara the bird would belong to the tribe, it was also tapu (sacred,
prohibited) and should not be approached. The continued appearance of Taiāmai at the
rock, in the domain of Kaitara, enhanced the mana (prestige, status) of the place and, by
extension, its people. Some time later, a jealous rangatira, from a nearby tribe, attempted
to capture Taiāmai. However, the bird escaped by melting into the rock. Taiāmai never
reappeared… Kaitara named the rock ‘Te tino-o-Taiāmai’… In time, the name ‘Taiāmai’
was applied to the region around the rock.\textsuperscript{20}

This rock, Te Tino o Taiāmai (The Essence of Taiāmai), still stands near the township of
Ohaeawai.\textsuperscript{21}

Another symbolic element that references the area is the black background itself.
Black began to dominate Cotton’s palette from around 1998 onwards, as he increasingly
situated his art specifically in Te Tai Tokerau.\textsuperscript{22} This change has been widely
recognised as a response to the lack of traditional adornment and imagery in the Māori meeting
houses of the North.\textsuperscript{23} Before this point in his career, Cotton had drawn extensively from
the figurative paintings in East Coast wharenui, such as Rongopai,\textsuperscript{24} but when he turned
his attention North to his own tūrangawaewae, he found a marked absence of whakairo
and kōwhaiwhai. This absence is a legacy of the missionaries’ strong influence in

\textsuperscript{18} Bishop-Jahnke, “Tuakiri,” 70.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 53.
\textsuperscript{20} Deidre Brown, “Haere Mai ki Taiamai: Coming Home to Taiamai,” in Shane Cotton, ed. Linda Tyler
\textsuperscript{23} Jahnke, “Voices Beyond the Pae.” 11.
\textsuperscript{24} Strongman, “Ruarangi.” 19.
Northland from the early 19th century onwards, as they had consistently denigrated Māori ancestral imagery as “erotic, heathen and sinful”. In Robert Leonard’s words, “today Ngā Puhi meeting houses have almost no decoration, their art having been suppressed by colonial missionaries who considered it hedonistic and pagan and certain images even satanic.” Cotton’s own wharenui at Ngāwhā is one of the many plain houses of the North. Robert Jahnke writes of Cotton’s journey as he “mined the houses of the East Coast before fabricating his own virtual house in lamentation for an aesthetically barren Northern landscape.” Through its connotations with mourning and with emptiness, black is another element that connects Cotton’s work to Te Tai Tokerau, as a reflection of this aspect of the unique history of that place.

The connection to place via his use of black is further reinforced by its association with the work of Ralph Hotere (Te Aupōuri) – another Māori artist from the north, and one who is renowned for his “modernist black fields”. Cotton’s reference to Hotere is made explicit by the thin red and white lines that trace a cross over the surface of the painting, quoting Hotere’s Black Paintings series of 1968. Black in this sense is connecting to Te Tai Tokerau in a more contemporary way, relating to the emergence of a distinctive Northern Māori art aesthetic.

Black also has wider associations with Aotearoa New Zealand as a whole, as our de facto national colour, and as Strongman writes, the use of black “equally refers to the tradition of black paintings running through New Zealand art history, from Petrus van der Velden through to McCahon and Hotere.” She also connects Cotton’s use of the phrase ‘Blackout Movement’, as the title of both a 2001 solo exhibition and a major painting, to the early 19th century “prophetic sect in the Hokianga later known as the Blackout Movement”. The sect, first led by Papahurihia, was named as such due to their practice

28 Jahnke, “Tuakiri,” 47.
29 Ibid., 12; Strongman, “Ruarangi.” 28.
30 For a further analysis of Hotere’s influence on Cotton’s work, see Bishop-Jahnke, “Tuakiri,” 73-74.
33 Ibid.
of meeting in pitch darkness to summon spirits. This last association ties Cotton’s extensive use of black back to specifically Northern narratives.

These multiple connections of black to the North, along with the presence of the white bird image, combine in *Ruarangi* to create what Strongman calls a “symbolic landscape of Northland.” The symbols evoke place through the narratives of the people who have lived there. These indirect, symbolic ways of painting place are used alongside literal place names that label a landscape and evoke place in a more direct way.

Using *Ruarangi* to illustrate the many methods that Cotton used to paint a particular place in the year 2000, it becomes clear that over the course of the decade, symbolic references to place in his work gradually decrease and become increasingly ambiguous, while literal descriptions disappear altogether. This results in the absence of a singular place in his paintings, giving way to a more universal approach. The shift is initially exemplified by *Pouerua* (2003, Fig. 3). Here, the black background is maintained, but it is not an explicit nod to Hotere as in *Ruarangi*. There is a small slice of landscape in the form of single hill, possibly representing Pouerua, but it is obscured by lettering and not labelled with a place name. Pouerua is referenced through the title and also appears in the painting, but the lettering spelling it out is much smaller and less emphatic than ‘Ohaeawai’ and ‘Pouerua’ in *Ruarangi*. In this instance it is written into the painting with a bit of visual wordplay: ‘pou e rua’ literally means ‘two posts,’ and these words are painted vertically alongside two rainbow-coloured posts. These more ambiguous and less pronounced elements illustrate the fading prevalence of literal renderings of land and place in Cotton’s painting.

However, symbolic references to place are still numerous. A white bird flying up the top and near the middle of the painting recalls the story of Taiāmāi, and the large tui situated in front of the target image may recall the missionary presence in Northland, as its alternate name is Parson Bird (due to its characteristic white neck feathers that resemble a parson’s collar.) This is a feasible but very subtle link, whereas the blocky text along the bottom of the canvas, ‘Aniwaniwa Kuare,’ clearly references place through the story of Cotton’s ancestor, Uenuku. As John Huria explains, before Uenuku was born,

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36 Ibid., 24.
37 Ibid., 16.
his mother Ahuaiti was abandoned by his father Rahiri... Ahuaiti gave birth to Uenuku without companions or assistance... When Uenuku grew up he went in search of his father and his birthright. He found his father, and learnt karakia (prayers) from him, then returned to live with his mother at Pouerua, Pākaraka.  

This clarifies the link between Uenuku and Pouerua, while the connection between Uenuku and Aniwaniwa is illuminated in Wiremu Wi Hongi’s political history of Ngā Puhi:

The birth-pangs of Ahuaiti began. She had no companions, she was by herself. Her only friend was Āniwaniwa, a rainbow (uenuku). When the child was born his name was given after that rainbow, that is, Uenuku. That is the origin of that name, Uenuku-kūare, Uenuku-the-ignorant. The reason was, he had no father to teach him incantations.

This story of Āniwaniwa and Uenuku-kūare has a strong connection to Cotton’s ancestral homeland, which is further reiterated through the title, ‘Pouerua,’ as well as the two rainbow posts that spell out the place name visually.

After Cotton’s 2003 survey exhibition that Pouerua was a part of, all manner of references to place became less prevalent in his works, although some indirect connections to Te Tai Tokerau were still maintained in a number of paintings, most commonly through representations of Cotton’s ancestors and their narratives. Te Waiwhāriki (2004, Fig. 7) is an example of this, consisting primarily of a portrait of the renowned Ngā Puhi rangatira, Hongi Hika - or more accurately, of his moko. Cotton painted this image after a photograph taken of a wooden bust that Hika had carved in his own likeness while in New South Wales on a gun-buying expedition in 1814. The title of the work, which is also painted along the bottom edge of the painting, is the name of one of Hika’s muskets that was itself named after a battle between Ngāti Rangi and Ngāti Maru. As Ngāhiraka Mason explains: “Hika had a custom of naming guns to commemorate significant Ngā Puhi battles, thereby committing the memory of warfare to history.”

Te Waiwhāriki refers in this case to an attack on Cotton’s Ngāti Rangi hapū by Ngāti Maru that took place at Puketona pā late in the 18th century. In this way, Cotton evokes a place with a narrative that intertwines the life of his ancestor, Hongi Hika, with a significant historical event of his own hapū that took place in his tūrangawaewae.

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40 Sissons, Hongi and Hohepa, Ngā Pūriri o Taimaia, 67.
42 Sissons, Hongi and Hohepa, Ngā Pūriri o Taimaia, 31.
44 Sissons, Hongi and Hohepa, Ngā Pūriri o Taimaia, 31.
After this painting, literal references to place names or historical events are mostly absent in Cotton’s work, although the image of Hika’s visage appears regularly in works up until 2007, including *Self-Portrait* (2005), *Play* (2006, Fig. 10), and *The Hanging Sky* (2007). There are also occasional appearances of other very subtle symbols related to Te Tai Tokerau through narrative and history, such as the serpent motif in *I Will Look Over Here. You Look Over There.* (2007-9, Fig. 15). This image was painted after a drawing dated 1855, which is the only surviving original of many such drawings that were distributed around the Bay of Islands and Hokianga districts during the Nākahi movement in the mid 1850s, to be displayed in Māori homes. As Bronwyn Elsmore explains, the drawings were said to preserve anyone who looked at them from a fatal disease that was predicted to visit the world, and “a man who professed to be both a doctor and a priest was dispensing medicine, and a picture of the dragon was to be copied and hung in each house as a protection.”

The surviving drawing from this time is titled ‘Ko to Pukapuka o te Tarakona’ (‘The Book of the Dragon’) and depicts a serpent or dragon flying above settlements in the Hokianga and Whangerei districts: Hokianga, Pakamae, Waimamaku, Wairoa, Wangarei, and Ngunguru. Cotton has reversed the image of the serpent in his painting, and coloured it an azure blue, but it is nonetheless an accurate copy of the 1855 line drawing. Along the bottom of the canvas are four collections of dots that make up oval shapes, also taken from the same drawing: they were originally used to represent settlements and were labelled with the above-listed place names. By clearly appropriating the image of the serpent and settlements from this drawing, Cotton connects to Te Tai Tokerau through its unique historical narrative, and reuses an innovative way of depicting Northern places.

A more subtle connection to place is also made through Cotton’s regular inclusion of biblical excerpts, from both the English King James Version and Te Paipera Tapu, the 19th century Māori Bible. Cotton often drew extensively from these in his works of 1999-2001, then painted biblical excerpts largely faded from his works until *The Valley* (2007) and the ‘To and Fro’ series of works from 2009-10, which was based on the Book

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45 This drawing is reproduced in full in Brown and Ellis, *Te Puna,* 57.
48 Brown and Ellis, *Te Puna,* 56-57.
of Job. An example from this series is *Going To and Fro. Walking Up and Down In It.* (2009, Fig. 17) in which the phrases of the title (‘going to and fro in the earth’ and ‘walking up and down in it’) are spray-painted in red over a dark background reminiscent of a stormy night sky. These phrases are taken from the following passage in the Book of Job in the King James Version:

1:6 Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan came also among them.

1:7 And the LORD said unto Satan, Whence comest thou? Then Satan answered the LORD, and said, From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it.

Such biblical excerpts may serve to recall the unique history of missionaries and Christianity in Te Tai Tokerau: the first place in Aotearoa New Zealand to have a permanent missionary presence.

Another common motif with a subtle possible link to Taiāmāi, is rock. Rocky outcrops, fragments, and cliff faces feature strongly in Cotton’s work from 2006-2011, and may reference the distinctive rock ‘Te Tino o Taiāmāi’ (The Spirit of Taiāmāi), named after the mythical bird that also lends its name to the surrounding region. An example of this is *Easy Forever Forever Easy* (2011, Fig. 22), which features a large rock image standing in the centre of the image. The pitted surface of the rock along with its vertical grain recalls the texture of ‘Te Tino o Taiāmāi,’ a 12-foot high block of solidified lava that stands out in a field near Ohaeawai. This stone was tapu, as it was regarded as “the spirit and essence of the whole area, and its mana was prodigious.” The possible but very subtle connection between this particular stone and Cotton’s rock face in *Easy Forever Forever Easy* (and many other paintings) is supported by the images of birds flying around the rock. Birds are almost always present in Cotton’s ‘rock paintings,’ and Bishop-Jahnke claims “avian images are presented in Cotton’s paintings in reference to the sacred bird Taiāmāi after which the region is named. Cotton’s bird icons are manifestations of the region…” Therefore, when rock faces and birds feature together in

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51 Job 1:6-7 (King James Version).
Cotton’s paintings, the link to Taiāmai through the story of the fabled bird and distinctive rock becomes clearer.

However, the biblical excerpts, rock faces and avian images are all notably ambiguous, and there is a striking lack of explicit references to a particular place in Cotton’s works between 2006 and 2011. Only recently has there been a reappearance of literal descriptions of place: in the new form of a map as seen in Diamonds and Pearls (2011, Fig. 23). This work consists of a road map of the North Island, over which Cotton has painted a large, black, diamond-shaped block of pigment. Smoky white designs reminiscent of traditional Māori imagery trace over this black ground. The majority of the mapped island is covered by the diamond, with only Northland, the East Coast, a slice of Taranaki, the lower portion of the island from Palmerston North down to Wellington, and the top of the South Island remaining visible. Despite this partial concealment, the map represents a marked return to works located firmly in Aotearoa New Zealand, and in Te Tai Tokerau.

Cultural underpinnings

In Diamonds and Pearls, the stark contrast between the map’s precise documentation of roads and the free design winding over blackness within the diamond, also highlights the way Cotton has always utilised both Māori and Pākehā ways of recalling place. The landscapes and written place names seen in earlier paintings (e.g. Ruarangi, 2000), and the maps of later works (e.g. Diamonds and Pearls, 2011), are all traditionally Western techniques of referencing places. Maps and landscapes, labelled with place names, are generally regarded as objective methods of depicting place: recalling the physical shape of the land in that particular location, or recording the network of roads and towns that cover the land there, and communicating the official names associated with these.

Examples of these techniques can be seen in the works of Charles Heaphy, whose land profiles have featured in Cotton’s earlier works of the 1990s. Heaphy served variously as a draughtsman, artist, surveyor and explorer in colonial New Zealand from 1839 to 1865. As Michael Fitzgerald notes,

Heaphy’s most enduring legacy is the body of topographical watercolours, portrait studies, charts and coastal profiles which he produced, mainly in the service of the New Zealand Company, during his early years in New Zealand. His depictions of company sites and settlements remain fresh and vivid, reflecting the eye of a young enthusiast firmly based in the English tradition of accurate draughtsmanship [italics added]. This highlights the European emphasis on accuracy when depicting place, in order to achieve the most naturalistic and ostensibly objective representation.

None of these methods are actually objective, however, as even landscapes are subject to aesthetic ‘improvement’ in the eye of the artist, and the features chosen to be represented are based on that person’s particular view of what is most distinctive about a place. In Heaphy’s case, although ‘accuracy’ was highly valued in his role as English draughtsman, Iain Sharp explains that:

> His principal task was to provide attractive images that would encourage Britons to subscribe to the New Zealand Company’s scheme of planned settlement. While he stopped short of downright lies in the furtherance of this assignment, he was certainly prepared to bend the truth. In his landscapes he knowingly emphasised – and sometimes exaggerated – the expanse of fine pasture, the abundance of highly prized timber and the other commercial opportunities there for the taking by the enterprising migrant.

This exposes the inherent subjectivity of landscapes, no matter how naturalistically they may be rendered. Ewen McDonald sees Cotton’s use of the European landscape tradition in his works as an ironic gesture, as the genre is “an ideological construct that promoted possession and ownership as much as it depicted landforms.” As such, a landscape in Cotton’s painting is perhaps more symbolic than literal, representing a conventionally European view of place.

Furthermore, maps illustrate the Western proclivity for measuring and recording information to do with a place as precisely as possible, and presenting that information in what seems like the most detached way: with a bird’s eye view of the land, orientated north to south. However, this ostensible detached objectivity is simply a surface appearance, which is again demonstrated by the man of multifarious talents, Charles Heaphy. A map drawn by Heaphy in 1861 shows a very similar view of the North Island and top of the South Island to that featured in *Diamonds and Pearls*. Instead of roads, however, blocks of colour break up the land: white is used to show native lands, portions

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59 Fitzgerald, “Heaphy, Charles – Biography.”
61 Ewen McDonald, *Shane Cotton* (Sydney: Mori Gallery, 1999), unpaginated.
62 The map is reproduced in colour in Sharp, *Heaphy*, 166.
held by Europeans are coloured in red, and ‘districts that have fed the war’ (in Taranaki) are shaded green.\textsuperscript{63}

This map was printed in the same month (July 1861) as Heaphy’s essay titled ‘Statistical Notes Relating to the Maoris and their Territory,’\textsuperscript{64} which sought to discredit Māori resistance of British land acquisition by showing that Māori still possessed three times as much land as the British,\textsuperscript{65} a fact which was clearly portrayed in his map. From this he concludes that Māori were not “engaged in a war for the preservation of their land, and with it for their existence,”\textsuperscript{66} but rather, he claimed that the resistant iwi “have been actuated by the mere love of marauding and plunder,” and motivated by a “jealousy of the European wealth.”\textsuperscript{67} This shows how Heaphy created his map of New Zealand to display the information that was crucial for his argument, and used it to undermine the Māori resistance towards the work that he was involved in. His bias illustrates the fact that maps are not simply straightforward, objective depictions of land and place, but rather, are portrayals that are constructed to suit the purposes of those producing them. What is chosen to be presented or left off the map tells as much about the mapmaker as it does about the place being portrayed.

The contemporary road map seen in \textit{Diamonds and Pearls} is a clear descendant of its 19th century ancestors: similarities can be seen in the portion of the country that is shown, its orientation with South Island at the bottom and Cape Reinga at the top (the ‘right way up’), and the place names used to label certain areas, such as ‘Hawke’s Bay’ and ‘Wellington’. Place names are yet another seemingly objective, literal description of place, but of course, places are named and renamed according to various cultural traditions and protocols, and the choice of which to use on a map is necessarily based on a person or group’s subjective opinion of what is more appropriate and meaningful. Due to the fact that most maps were drawn by Europeans, the place names that feature on maps both historical and current are necessarily only those that were known to Europeans, and favoured by them.

An example of a Māori place name that was not known to European people and therefore did not appear on maps, is Taiāmaiai itself. As Tangiwai wrote in 1931 about the story of the eponymous bird and rock: “A fragment of place-nomenclature this, quite

\textsuperscript{63} Sharp, \textit{Heaphy}, 166.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 165.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 167.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.
unknown to the European residents of those parts. And, by the way, Taiamai is a name that does not appear on any of the maps of the district. It should be preserved, for it is a good name…”68 The absence of this name from official maps of the area continues to this day,69 illustrating the subjective nature of which place names are used, depending on the mapmakers’ knowledge and judgement.

Also absent from the common road maps of today are the names of the iwi who occupy certain areas. Ngatiawa [Te Āti Awa], Ngatiruanui [Ngāti Ruanui], Ngatihunguru [Ngāti Kahungunu], and Rarawas [Te Rarawa] are all labelled on Heaphy’s 1861 version.70 Evidently that information is no longer considered relevant or important for today’s maps, such as that in Diamonds and Pearls. These maps focus on roads due to their primary purpose as tools for navigation while driving from place to place. It could be argued that the inclusion of iwi names would add significant information without necessarily detracting from clarity of map reading, but they are left out nevertheless. Such changes in the information shown on maps demonstrate their inherently subjective nature, despite their seemingly objective surface appearance that emphasises accuracy and precision.

These elements show that the traditionally European ways of describing place, through landscapes, place names and maps, may appear objective due to their emphasis on naturalistic renderings or accurate measurements of land formations, but are nevertheless all inherently subjective. They do, however, clearly aim to exclude or minimise distinctly cultural associations of place, such as local narrative and history.

In contrast, Cotton’s more indirect and symbolic methods recall place by evoking Māori connections and associations with that place, which are overtly based in local narrative and the subjective experiences of those who have lived there. Naturalistic depictions and supposedly unprejudiced representations are supplanted by allusions to ancestors, events that shaped the history of the local people, defining stories, and references to the art style of others who have come from that place. These methods of depicting place demonstrate the strongly intertwined nature of people with specific

69 Taīāmāi does not appear on any map or database by Land Information New Zealand: a government department responsible for land titles and topographic information (http://www.linz.govt.nz). It is also absent from the Kiwimaps commercial road map of Whangarei and the Bay of Islands (Edition 16), and Google Maps as at April 22, 2013.
70 Sharp, Heaphy, 166.
landscapes within Te Ao Māori, a concept embodied by the phrase ‘tangata whenua.’\textsuperscript{71} This interconnection leads to a dual effect of Cotton’s symbols. They recall both a place and a people: they simultaneously situate him in Taiāmai and affirm his Ngāti Rangi identity.

**Place and identity**

Earlier in the chapter, it was shown that Cotton’s works of the period 1998-2001 were firmly located in Ohaeawai, Taiāmai, or the wider Tai Tokerau region, through the use of traditionally European descriptions of place such as landscapes and written place names as well as symbolism that referenced place via local Māori narratives and art styles. After this time, landscapes and place names began to disappear from his work, while the symbolism used became more subtle and ambiguous. This shift in Cotton’s work is indicative of a change in the content of his practice. At the beginning of the decade, Cotton was expressing his identity as Ngāti Rangi, and centring the local in a globalised contemporary art world, by situating his work firmly in a specific place. Over the course of the decade, Cotton’s focus has turned outwards, away from identity politics and towards new themes such as transformation and visual perception. The absence of a singular place in these later works has resulted in a universal approach to their content.

The link between place and expression of identity in Cotton’s early works of the decade was explored by Bishop-Jahnke, who demonstrated that the transformation in his art up to that point “coincided with Cotton’s pursuit to locate and define his identity as Ngāti Rangi.”\textsuperscript{72} She traced Cotton’s journey of discovering his Māori heritage and the effects this developing personal identity had on his art in the period 1991-2003.\textsuperscript{73} Depictions and symbols of land in general began to appear in his paintings in the early 1990s, in the form of landscapes, mountain profiles, and pot plants,\textsuperscript{74} once Cotton began to learn more about his Māori heritage. This relates to the importance of land as a foundation of Māori identities, both collective and personal.\textsuperscript{75} Bishop-Jahnke describes

\textsuperscript{72} Bishop-Jahnke, “Tuakiri,” 2.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., ii.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 26.
\textsuperscript{75} Sims and Thompson-Fawcett, “Planning for the Cultural Landscape.” 263; Mason Durie, Ngā Tai Matatū: Tides of Māori Endurance (Melbourne; Auckland: Oxford University Press, 2005), 59.
the form of a mountain in Cotton’s work as a “general statement of turangawaewae and intimate reference to Papatuanuku, which therefore prescribes a sense of place and belonging. The value therefore resides in the land’s symbolic association with identity.”

From this widespread use of land in general as a symbol of his broadly Māori identity, Cotton began to move toward depicting and symbolising a specific place in an expression of his particular identity as Ngāti Rangi. As Merata Kawharu writes during a description of the Waiwhārīki battle, “Ngāti Rangi was the tribal name for all those people living in and near Ōhaeawai and at Ngāwhā.” Cotton is descended from these people through his father’s side, and although he has never lived in Taiāmai himself, he regards that place as his tūrangawaewae due to the significance of the land there to his family and to Ngāti Rangi as a whole. Mason Durie describes how urban migration of Māori in the second half of the twentieth century resulted in “a gap...between place of residence and tūrangawaewae—the place that was the customary home to tribe and whānau.” This describes Cotton’s own situation, as his father moved from Te Tai Tokerau to Lower Hutt in the late 1950s, which is where Cotton was raised. He did, however go on “long summer holidays” to Northland during his childhood, resulting in a familiarity with - and lasting connection to - his Ngāti Rangi wharenui at Ngāwhā as well as the surrounding environment.

The interconnected nature of Māori identity with the land on which the community lives is explained by Linda Tuhiwai-Smith, who notes, “for Māori there are several ways of identifying one’s indigenous ‘community’. One commonly used way is to introduce yourself by naming the mountain, the river, the tribal ancestor, the tribe and the family. Through this form of introduction you locate yourself in a set of identities which have been framed geographically, politically and genealogically.” This illustrates how references to places such as Taiāmai in Cotton’s works are simultaneously an expression of his personal identity due to the land’s close connection with Ngāti Rangi.

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77 Jahnke, “Voices Beyond the Pae.” 10.
79 Strongman, “Ruarangi.” 16.
80 Durie, Ngā Tai Matatū, 23.
81 Strongman, “Ruarangi.” 16.
82 Ibid., 16-17.
The elements in his work that link to Ngāwhā, Ohaeawai, Taiāmai, or Te Tai Tokerau more broadly, all affirm his identity through the unique connection that his Ngā Puhi iwi and Ngāti Rangi hapū have with these places. Bishop-Jahnke refers to these elements as “site specific identity affirmations...[that] all contribute to locating Cotton within his iwi of Ngāti Rangi, thus anchoring him to a particular place, that is Taiāmai.”

The shift away from referencing places reveals his own confidence in this identity, as if once discovered and affirmed, he no longer feels the need to express it explicitly or to further explore it in his paintings. As Lynne Seear has observed, “Cotton’s past works were clearly linked to landmarks important to his iwi (tribe), but it seems the artist no longer needs to signal his Māori-ness through recognisable symbols. Cotton has explained elsewhere that Māori cultural sources are still embedded in his work but have become ‘naturalised,’ implicit rather than explicit.” This shift may also relate to contemporary forms of Māori identities that are less traditional in nature. As Mason Durie explains, along with the gap between place of residence and tūrangawaewae,

A second major consequence of urbanisation has been a shift in the foundations for identity. Now no longer exclusively dependent on hapū, iwi, customary lands, or marae, identity is increasingly a function of being part of Māori networks and participating in those aspects of culture that are shared by all Māori. Although tribes have distinctive dialects, a common Māori language has become the province of thousands of second language learners.

This last point also applies to Cotton, who began learning Te Reo Māori as his second language during the early 1990s. Since this time, Te Reo has appeared fairly consistently in his paintings, and could be said to express a broadly Māori identity, still present in his work even after references to Ngā Puhi and specifically Ngāti Rangi place and narrative faded.

An example of this is Smashing Myths (2010, Fig. 20), in which the words of Te Inoi a Te Ariki (the Te Reo Māori version of The Lord’s Prayer) are spray-painted in red against a cloudy sky, covering most of the canvas. A small area of a rocky surface, rendered in black and white, features in the bottom left corner, while two images of hummingbirds are present in the upper half of the painting. One of these birds is also black and white, and this, along with the unimposing rock face, faintly recalls the story of Taiāmai that was so clearly evoked in earlier works, such as Ruarangi. The hapū-centric

86 Durie, Ngā Tai Matatū, 23.
identity that was previously affirmed through this narrative and connection to place has now given way to a more general Māori one, expressed through the use of the common Māori language in the form of a prayer that is often spoken by Christian Māori all over Aotearoa New Zealand and abroad.88 In this way, Cotton’s expression of his identity could also be seen as taking a more contemporary and less traditional form, by referencing aspects of culture that are shared by all Māori rather than solely members of his own iwi or hapū. This expression may reflect the reality of many Māori today who are no longer connected to a certain place through iwi, customary lands, or marae; but strongly identify as Māori nonetheless.

This broadly Māori form of identity is further expressed by the upoko tuhituhi (representation of toi moko),89 in the centre of Smashing Myths. This is a reference to the historical Māori practice “of preserving tapu or sacred, ornately carved tattooed heads of the deceased, particularly those of chiefs.”90 This practice was corrupted when the toi moko became valuable items of trade in the late 18th century until around 1830,91 with European museums and collectors willing to pay high prices for those considered “finely tattooed.”92 Their actions resulted in hundreds of heads being held in various institutions around the world, which have begun to be returned to Aotearoa New Zealand over the past few decades. Robert K. Paterson writes, “nearly 360 Māori ancestral remains (including toi moko) have been returned to New Zealand since 1867. Returns have occurred from some 13 foreign countries and 55 different institutions.”93 This episode of Aotearoa New Zealand’s colonial history, along with the subsequent and on-going repatriation effort, is another aspect of the contemporary Māori world that is not unique to any one iwi, but is a part of common Māori history. Because of this, it can be argued that the upoko tuhituhi image in Cotton’s painting could also function as a symbol of pantribal Māori identity, albeit a sensitive and contentious one.

89 The actual preserved heads are known as toi moko (or moko mōkai). Robert Jahnke suggested the term ‘upoko tuhituhi’ in 2003 to describe the particular painted heads of Cotton’s works, as explained in Strongman, “Ruarangi.” 31.
90 Julie Paama-Pengelly, Roundabout (Wellington, New Zealand: roundabout, 2010), unpaginated.
92 Horatio Gordon Robley, Moko, or, Māori Tattooing (Papakura: Southern Reprints, 1987), 167.
From the local to the universal

The broader expression of his identity also allows for the exploration of universal themes, due to his works no longer being situated in a singular place. The emphasis therefore shifts from traditional, localised, personal identity to contemporary Māori identity in general, and outwards even further to global ideas of time, transformation, reality, and visual perception. As Jim and Mary Barr wrote about Cotton’s Red Shift painting of 2006-7 (Fig. 11), his “consistent use of narratives located here in New Zealand is subsumed within a bigger idea. It seems that Cotton has metaphorically leapt from the cliff of narrative…he has moved from the local to the universal.”94 This shift away from local narratives and identity politics correlates to Cotton’s change in personal circumstances. As he explains in an interview with Nicola Shepheard in 2011, “I became very interested in Māori politics and history when I was working in the Māori department [at Massey University], but I’m not connected to that community any more, so it doesn’t feed into my work.”95 Cotton worked as Lecturer of Māori Visual Arts at Te Pūtahi-a-Toi, the School of Māori Studies at Massey University, from 1993-2005,96 corresponding with the period of his career where his works were most explicitly exploring issues of Māori history and identity.

It was also around this time when Cotton’s works began to be included in major overseas exhibitions, such as Paradise Now? Contemporary Art From the Pacific (New York, 2004) and nEUclear reactions (Burgos, Spain, 2006).97 His international presence expanded over the course of the decade, as he was awarded his first overseas residency in 2008, a three month stay at Artspace in Sydney,98 and later held his first solo exhibition outside of Australasia with ‘To and Fro’ at Rossi & Rossi Gallery in London, 2010.99 This increasing engagement with the global contemporary art world may have contributed to Cotton’s more universal subject matter, expressed perhaps necessarily with an absence of singular place. Instead, Cotton’s paintings began featuring unspecified spaces that could

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97 Ibid.
99 “Shane Cotton: Biography.”
be anywhere or nowhere. This ambiguity of place enabled a less restricted narrative – opening up the space for a multiplicity of possible meanings.

An example of this is Red Shift, in which a rough cliff face on the left side of the canvas extends vertically without limit, cut off only by the edge of the canvas at top and bottom. To the right of this cliff, taking up the vast majority of the landscape painting, is empty space. It would appear to be a skyscape, as suggested by the pale pigment that has been airbrushed, cloud-like, onto the black ground; and the presence of nine birds that seem to be blown about by an unseen wind. There is no text in this painting, the title does not name a place and, aside from the subtle link to Taiāmaia via the presence of rock and birds, there is no reference to a singular place. The image of the cliff face is based on photographs of the Grand Canyon, but the painting is not expressly located there through any of the methods that were discussed earlier in this chapter, rather the place is left ambiguous. This is made possible through the fact that only a fragment of rock can be seen within the picture frame, so rather than a full landscape that symbolises a particular place, the viewer sees only a generic portion of a cliff face that could be anywhere in the world.

This illustrates the shift in Cotton’s practice from works firmly located in a singular place, to paintings without any specification of place. His works from the beginning of the decade, with their strong evocation of Taiāmaia, centred the local in the context of a globalised contemporary art world as a consequence of expressing an identity founded on a deep connection to land and place. These later works, without that localised expression of identity, deal with universal themes that are made more accessible to wider audiences through non-specific place. In analysing Cotton’s works up until 2003, Blair French writes:

By insisting on the incorporation of the local in their work, artists like Cotton—whose conception of the local reaches beneath national or regional specificity, or even a generalised concept of Māori identity, to the experience of tūrangawaewae and Cotton’s own Ngāpuhi identity—oppose the new globalist universalism… Cotton initially opposed this universalism by evoking a place that reversed the most common centre-periphery dynamic in contemporary art.

However, it has been put forward that such localised discourse no longer functions as a resistance of globalism, as difference and particularity in the art world is now exalted, and the “marginal is mainstreamed on the condition it defines itself as marginal and is over-respectful of the local.”\textsuperscript{102} As Cotton moved away from explicit expression of his identity towards more universal themes and content, place became less definite, fixed, and singular, such as in \textit{Red Shift} where the place depicted is almost entirely ambiguous. This results in a sense of greater inclusion to a wider range of people across the globe, as no one is an outsider when the place is at once anywhere and nowhere. Rock is a feature of the land almost everywhere in the world and therefore does not limit the universality of the image.

It is also not specified whether \textit{Red Shift} depicts a real or imagined place, leaving viewers to decide for themselves. In Victoria Lynn’s opinion, “the paintings seem to be otherworldly, both somewhere and nowhere, defying the specificity of narrative.”\textsuperscript{103} This otherworldly or unreal quality is created by the unnatural appearance of all the elements in the painting. The cliff face looks as if it has been digitally rendered in greyscale, with a rough, almost pixelated texture and an edge that seems too sharp and sudden, as though it was delineated in Photoshop. This sharpness contrasts with the haziness of the sky, where the airbrushed ‘clouds’ spread consistently over the surface of the dark background in a rather unusual way. The birds are scattered over the surface of the painting, on top of both rock and sky, coloured unnaturally in blue and red or left in black and white. One attenuated bird image has been repeated six times, in differing sizes and orientations, emphasising the fact that these are altered and reproduced representations of birds rather than naturalistic depictions. All of these qualities result in the creation of a space that is inherently ambiguous and “hard to name – part-mythical underworld, part-dreamscape, part-cyberspace, and partly the long night known in Māori as Te Pō.”\textsuperscript{104} This unreal, indeterminate space lends itself very well to the new, more universal themes in Cotton’s work and highlights the relationship between place and space in his painting.

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\textsuperscript{102} Charles Green, ed., \textit{2006 Contemporary Commonwealth} (Melbourne: Council of Trustees of the National Gallery of Victoria, 2006), 13.
\textsuperscript{103} Lynn, “Sheer Presence.” unpaginated.
Painted space

Real places exist in three-dimensional, physical space, and traditional landscape painting strives to create an illusion of that space in the depiction of a certain place. In a similar fashion to photography, landscape paintings depict a chosen area of space within the frame, and the effects of visual perspective, such as decreasing range of colour and detail with increasing distance from the viewer, are recreated to give the sense of depth to the flat surface of the image. As has been shown, Cotton chose to depict a real place in ways that did not require the illusion of space, primarily through the use of symbols that refer to the place through cultural associations, as exemplified by Pouerua (2003, Fig. 3).

In Pouerua, the black background that is consistent over the entire field of the painting provides a flat surface on which the symbols and motifs are arranged. There is no illusion of depth, no depiction of ground, sky, or horizon. The flatness of the two panels on which it is painted is further emphasised by the presence of gestural marks and dots in white spray-paint, and the use of text on the left panel, such as the letter ‘R’ standing sideways on the left edge. As Jim and Mary Barr note, these elements “draw us back to the painting’s surface in much the same way that the application of papier collage does in early Cubist works.” Writing most often takes the form of flat marks on a page, and has been often used in Western painting since Cubism to highlight the two-dimensional nature of the image, in clear opposition to the traditionally lauded goal of making the illusion of space as convincing as possible.

This practice is countered to an extent by the name ‘Aniwaniwa Kuare’ along the bottom, rendered in blocky lettering that suggests a shallow field of receding space. A portion of shallow space is also suggested by the modelling of the two birds, which are both struck by light that casts shadows over parts of their bodies in a somewhat naturalistic way. Each of these three small, isolated illusions of shallow space is negated by the flatness of their surroundings: the blocky text on the flat background, and the birds each in front of a target-like motif of concentric circles. Neither target shows the effects of light or shadow that give the birds their three-dimensional appearance. The scale of each motif in the painting is also symbolic rather than naturalistic, with the tui painted larger than the kōtuku (heron), which is in turn larger than the upoko tuhituhi and tiny mountain profile. These widely varied and unnaturalistic scales also result in an absence

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of any unified illusionary space by reiterating the images as a collection of disparate motifs and symbols.

This overall lack of illusionary space in favour of the use of symbols to represent a real place results in the creation of what Blair French referred to as ‘cultural space’ – space in which the symbols exist and can evoke place through cultural associations. As Cotton shifted away from referencing real place in an expression of his identity, this cultural space also faded from his works, giving way to paintings with great illusionary depth that French terms ‘psychological space.’ An example of this is Red Shift, which depicts “one of the deepest spaces Cotton has ever painted.” The illusion of great depth in this work is created by the diagonal lines of the cliff face angled sharply from the left corners toward the centre of the painting. Their point of convergence if the lines were to continue, or the vanishing point of the painting, is midway between the top and bottom edges of the canvas but off to the left side, creating the effect of a vast expanse of empty space to the right. Its placement also gives the sense of being close to the rock while looking out into the endless void.

This limitless quality of the space is due to the fact that it is only the edge of the canvas that interrupts the skyscape to the right of the cliff, while the smoky airbrushed clouds obscure the view looking into the work, leaving the depth unknown. The size of the birds gives a sense of scale to the cliff but there is no suggestion of how high they are from the ground, or how much further up the cliff might extend past the top edge of the painting. This absence of limitations placed on the elements in the painting invites the viewer to imagine the scene continuing on outside the picture frame in all directions, perhaps infinitely. This is the imagined space that is perhaps being referred to by French’s mention of ‘psychological space.’

Unlike Cotton’s previous works that focussed on depicting real place without illusory space, here the focus has reversed, giving space significance over place. In the words of Victoria Lynn, “the space surrounding the forms is as significant as the imagery itself. This space is bodily. It is a void into which the viewer is invited to conceptually ‘leap’… a space for perception, reflection, isolation and resonance.” It is this shift towards space over place that lends the works of this series their universality. The creation

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108 Ibid.
109 Paton, “Hovering Suspense.”
of a psychological space that is not tied to any one place means that the work is open to a myriad of readings from viewers anywhere in the world, encompassing broad themes such as the unknown, the sublime, the infinite, the “fear of endless space,” and many more.

In 2008 Cotton produced a series of paintings, exhibited at the Melbourne Art Fair, that were focussed on neither place nor space but rather on singular forms and “the act of looking” upon them. Murky skyscapes are replaced by plain white backgrounds on which images of rock fragments, birds, and upoko tuhituhi appear. An example from this series is *Camp Fire* (2008, Fig. 13). Painted after a three-month residency in Sydney early in 2008, the fragmented rock imagery in these works is based on “outcrops, headlands and stone-walls photographed by Cotton on his wanderings around Sydney’s rocky coastal fringes, as well as sourced from landscape features in the USA and Aotearoa New Zealand.” However, none of these places are explicitly evoked, aside from the connection between the upoko tuhituhi and Aotearoa New Zealand. Neither is there a sense of deep space around these images, with a background devoid of cloud and the contrast of light and shade.

This emptiness recalls the plain black ground of *Pouerua*, but here there is an even greater sense that the imagery exists in a vacuum, or perhaps a digital space. The latter is suggested by the distorted and flattened appearance of the images, which have been rendered in black and an unnatural electric blue. The white ground resembles the blank space in an internet browser on the computer screen, or in the graphics-editing program Photoshop, which Cotton uses to modify images of birds found online. It is this vacuous and unreal space, along with the absence of references to one specific place, that shifts the focus of these paintings toward the decontextualized objects, and ultimately to the viewer’s perceptions of them. This shows how Cotton manipulates space in his works according to the focus of each painting, whether it be place and identity, universal themes encompassed within limitless space, or decontextualized objects without any emphasis on place or space.

In this chapter, Cotton’s various methods of painting place were explored, along with their cultural underpinnings and the functions of place within his artistic practice.

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114 Ibid.
was found that he shifted away from situating his works within a singular place as his focus turned away from personal identity expression. As he explored less localised and more universal themes, place became more ambiguous, while space deepened into an integral element of his works before flattening out once more into a minor feature, making way for other themes. This constant change in the treatment of place and space in Cotton’s painting continues to the present, affirming their position as major elements in his artistic practice.
II

Moving Through Time

_I, Time, call down, condense, confer_

_On the willing memory the shape these were:_

_I, more than your conscious carrier,_

_Am island, am sea, am father, farm, and friend;_

_Though I am here all things my coming attend;_

_I am, you have heard it, the Beginning and the End._

- Allen Curnow

Time is closely related to space in the sense that one cannot exist without the other. This is reflected in Cotton’s works, where in many cases the sense of time relates to his treatment of space. In paintings where there is deep space and ambiguous place, the time in which the painting is set is equally ambiguous and limitless, encompassing notions of past, present, and future simultaneously. Cotton has long explored notions and perceptions of time in his work, focusing on change and transformation through time and how this can be portrayed in paint.

This chapter will firstly discuss the ways in which Cotton symbolises the abstract concept of time. This also relates to how he represents varying cultural notions of time within his paintings, such as a Western linear conception and a Māori cyclical view of the passage of time. Cotton’s long-running theme of change through time and the many ways in which he paints this concept will then be explored. His chosen medium of painting will be analysed as an inherently time-based art form and one that enables the expression of multiple views of time within the same work. It will be compared with other contemporary art mediums such as photography, and the relationship between Cotton’s works and photography will also be explored. Lastly, the perceptions of temporality in Cotton’s works will be analysed in regards to both the subject matter and the medium of painting.

Symbolising time

Motifs and imagery that symbolise time have long featured in Cotton’s work, appearing first during the early 1990s and evolving throughout his career to the present. Bishop-Jahnke notes Cotton’s early use of digital clock motifs and the inclusion of significant year numbers in the history of Aotearoa New Zealand’s colonisation, such as 1865, the year the Maori Land Court was established, and 1907, the year in which the Tohunga Suppression Act was passed. These references to the past are joined by motifs symbolising both the present, such as contemporary LED displays, and the future, such as heraldic ribbons as used in Italian renaissance paintings “as a portent for things yet to come.” The three tenses of time are often combined rather than contrasted in his work, with Cotton quoted as saying: “I’m suggesting different experiences of time, not necessarily the distinction between past, present and future.” The examples of symbols from this period reflect Pākehā models of measuring and communicating time: clocks, Christian calendar years and a renaissance technique for evoking the future. While the motifs used to signify different aspects of time vary from this point onwards and become increasingly based within Te Ao Māori, the connection and unity of past, present and future remains a consistent theme in his work.

Another consistent theme, pointed out by Bishop-Jahnke, is “the notions of permanence and stability contrasted with notions of transformation and change.” A lasting symbol of stability in his paintings is the image of a bird, with Cotton revealing that birds “…symbolise absolute continuity…the tui of 500 years ago has the same colours, makes the same sounds as the tui of today. We change.” This is not to say that birds symbolise stasis, however, as birds do evolve and change, but only “at a rate that is attuned to the natural world,” suggesting the permanence of nature as a whole. Birds began to feature more prominently in Cotton’s works in the series of diptychs first shown in the ‘Shane Cotton: Survey’ exhibition of 2003, with tui, fantails, hawks and a heron all making an appearance. At least one bird was present in each painting of the series.

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4 Ibid., 39.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., 90.
9 Although birds had appeared as small motifs from 2000 onwards.
evoking the idea of natural continuity that Huria claims to function as “a counterpoint to the flux of human affairs.”¹⁰ In other words, the fast-paced change in the industrialised human world, where the lifestyle we live today would be unrecognisable to our ancestors who lived a century ago, is contrasted with the slow change of creatures in harmony with the natural environment.

Huria also posits another meaning associated with a specific type of bird that features in many of Cotton’s paintings (for example, White Tail of 2003): the pīwaiwaka (fantail). He explains how the pīwaiwaka:

…evokes the moment when Māui died in his shape-shifting attempt to thwart death by entering the vagina of Hine-nui-te-pō, intending to emerge from her mouth. Pīwaiwaka laughed, Hine-nui-te-pō awoke and crushed the life from Māui. Human mortality was not defeated. The fantail is a memento mori.¹¹

This shows how the fantail symbolises continuity through time as well as its inexorable passage that is associated with human mortality. All living creatures are mortal - it is just a matter of time before each life is brought to an end, and because of this, the concepts of death and time are closely related. Traditional Western forms of memento mori (in Latin, ‘remember that you will die’) include a skeleton or skull, using the image of past death to remind viewers of their own unavoidable mortality.¹² Cotton’s use of the pīwaiwaka is a uniquely Māori expression of this concept, but skulls also feature widely in his paintings, such as in Tuia (2003, Fig. 4), Red, White and Blue (2008) and To and Fro (2010).

However, he reverses the conventional association with skulls in his works, preferring them to function as symbols of the present rather than the inevitable morbid future. He stated in 2011 “if you paint a skull, the obvious thing is it’s about death but it’s actually about life, to actually live in the day. There’s an inevitability for all of us, there’s an end point to it all. Perhaps my work is just a reflection that I’m practicing for that moment.”¹³

In this way, he uses the future certainty of an end to emphasise the importance of the present, through the image of a person who has both lived and died in the past. This complex mix of various aspects of time is characteristic of Cotton’s symbolism, which unites rather than contrasts disparate views of time.

¹⁰ Huria, “Metamorphic Vocabulary.” 133.
¹¹ Ibid., 130.
Linear and cyclic time

The Pākehā use of *memento mori* illustrates the notion of linear time in which time is always moving forward, and those who have died are gone forever. Time in this sense is not just unrepeatable, it also moves in a very particular direction, with the past behind and the future in front. This view of time is expressed in many different English sayings, such as when we ‘put the past behind us’ and ‘look forward to the future.’ The relentless passage of time means that the past extends increasingly behind us, each event becoming more and more distant while we face the unknown and undetermined future. The three tenses of past, present, and future are always distinct and separate concepts, although necessarily linked. The past is thought of as real and ‘set in stone’: a series of actual knowable events that happened, whereas the future is usually regarded as entirely ambiguous and open to an infinite array of possible occurrences. The two are mediated by an immediately experienced and ever-changing present. In this view, it is actually the future that stays constant as an infinite field of ‘what is to come’ while the past and the present are continually updated.

In contrast to this European view, the traditional Māori notion of time is cyclic rather than linear, and the orientation of the subject within the flow of time is precisely the opposite. Roger Neich writes that:

…in a direct reversal of European usage, the Maori cosmology locates past time to the front, while the future is behind the person where it cannot be seen. Maori move into the future with their eyes on the past, regulating their behaviour in accord with the models of the past. The ancestors are not remote shadows relegated to the past but are continually present, spoken of in the present tense as they assist and guide their descendants in present-day situations.

In this view, the notions of past, present, and future are not as distinct as in the European model, but rather they exist side by side. The cyclical and concurrent understanding of time is represented in many different ways in Cotton’s work, such as through the use of the target motif of concentric circles. This motif began to feature in a consistent and large-scale form at the same time as birds: in Cotton’s 2003 retrospective exhibition. Here, they consisted mostly of varying shades of orange and ochre, with one or two

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thinner lines of complementary green or blue. In *Kikorangi* and *Pouerua* (both 2003), this is reversed, with shades of blue dominating the thick layers of circles and orange used for the thin lines. This concentric circle motif is seen regularly in Cotton’s work throughout the decade, from *Te Waiwhāriki* (2004, Fig. 7) through to *Te Atua Wera* (2012, Fig. 25). John Huria describes how the image depicts “layers of time that are contiguous, not linear, where past, present and future are placed side by side.” This again relates to the characteristic treatment of time in Cotton’s work, where all tenses and aspects of time are combined and unified, in accordance with the Māori view of time.

A painting that exemplifies all aspects of Cotton’s unification of time is *Play* (2006, Fig. 10). This work features a large, central image of Hongi Hika’s moko, as he carved it himself, covering the majority of the painting’s surface. The dark background surrounds this image and is seen in the lines of the moko and in the relief of eyes, mouth and chin, which gives the effect of Hika’s face emerging from the darkness, or equally of fading away: either appearing from the depths of time or becoming obscured by its passage. This image from the past is joined by two birds symbolising continuity and an unbroken line of evolution within nature, along with glowing remote control symbols and fragments of plants.

The moko image, birds, video player symbols and the plant stems and leaves that are scattered around Hika’s eyes, are all rendered in varying shades of blue. Laura Murray Cree notes that Cotton “finds blue a fascinating colour because, on canvas, it can be made to resemble an LED screen or light, bringing us into the present.” This electric appearance of blue is enhanced by the luminescence of the three symbols under the face: a set of navigation buttons (arrows pointing up, down, left and right with a select button in the middle), and the ‘pause’ and ‘play’ symbols as found on video or music players. These distinctly modern, glowing symbols complement the contemporary appearance of Hika’s face, which despite being based on an old carving, is brought into the present with a digital aesthetic. Cotton has achieved this through the use of a digitally manipulated photograph of the carving that he rendered in electric blue paint, with the dark patches around the eyes mouth and chin reflecting where the detail of the original was lost in the photograph. Blair Harris writes that “past, present and future continually overlap and flow together; Cotton’s paintings invite the viewer to examine the influence of the past on

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18 Huria, “Metamorphic Vocabulary.” 133.
the present and further, to consider new forms and technologies that anticipate the future.\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Play} exemplifies this perfectly as Cotton depicts his ancestor in the present context and with references to futuristic technologies, thereby blurring the boundaries between the tenses and situating his work within the Māori framework of time.

Hika is also made relevant to the present by his portrayal within an indeterminate space: hanging in a void without naturalistic methods of perspective. Space and time are again clearly related in this respect, since fixing an object in space also fixes it in time. Roger Neich explains the cultural relevance of spacial perspective and time:

> Perspective art fixes the thing represented in one instant of time and therefore fixes it in time-past, in historical time without the direct timeless relevance of aspective art. This fits well with the European model of absolute linear time, passing once and for all, and never to return. Ancestors shown in perspective are relegated to time-past, losing their immediate relevance to daily life.\textsuperscript{22}

Cotton’s choice to show Hika’s representation in an aspective context, devoid of either linear or aerial perspective, again situates this work in the Māori framework of time in which ancestors are continually present rather than fixed in the distant past.

The glowing blue symbols in \textit{Play} directly reference modern media technology, which would alone evoke the present, but the use of specifically ‘pause’ and ‘play’ symbols further explore contemporary notions of time. The ability to pause or freeze moving images at will is a relatively new phenomenon that is now common in industrialised countries. From streaming videos online to playing music on a stereo or mp3 player, to watching a DVD at home, we are now given the power to pause and resume the media we consume as it suits. Perhaps Cotton is suggesting that we do not have such power over the unmediated time of the real world, in the same way that Hongi Hika was unable to pause time and keep his people and culture unaffected by outside influences. Change is inevitable and in reality, there is no pause function, only play.

\textbf{Transformation and change}

The image of Hika’s carved moko appears in many other paintings around this time as a symbol of inevitable change. Transformation through time is a major theme in Cotton’s work, and he has described Hika’s portrait as symbolising:

\textsuperscript{22} Neich, \textit{Painted Histories}, 136.
… a moment of change. He lived in a time where he saw Māori custom change into the world of colonial New Zealand. He saw momentous change and shifting in society and so to me he’s symbolic of that idea of transformation, be it cultural transformation or identity transformation or whatever. I started painting him in lots of situations where he’s not static – where he’s fluid and things are happening in and around him. It’s this idea that everything’s in play and nothing stays the same.23

The colonial period of immense cultural change in New Zealand history is regularly referenced in Cotton’s practice, through many various symbols including Hika’s moko. His fascination with this historical period has lead several writers to describe him as a history painter.24 In the Western tradition, history painting was regarded as “the highest order of art,”25 and usually consisted of one scene from a well-known historical event, portrayed in a grand manner to convey a strong moral message. This is clearly very far removed from Cotton’s work, as he does not paint scenes that are fixed in one particular point in time and there is usually no clear narrative or moral promotion in his paintings. This establishes that Cotton is not a history painter in the traditional sense. He explained his take on history to Cree in 2008, saying: “my sense of history is not intellectual, it’s very selective. It’s a starting point for a lot of the things I do, the images I use. But my works are not located within that narrow frame. History is part of the subject matter.”26 This shows history is included in the content of his paintings rather than functioning as the context, making Cotton a new and different kind of history painter.

The subject of cultural change in history is part of the larger theme of transformation that is prevalent in many of Cotton’s paintings, even when no specific episode of past change is represented. Lara Strongman noted in 2006 that: “issues of transformation – of an ebb and flow of changes in form and meaning over time, of visions and revisions of and between cultures – have been central concerns of Cotton’s work for more than a decade.”27 He has continued to explore these notions in varying ways, all of which are deeply related to the concept of time. The two concepts of change and time are closely linked because the passage of time always creates change, and there cannot be change without time. The ways in which Cotton chooses to paint change include using

symbols of past episodes of cultural transformation, depicting the same object in differing points of time simultaneously, using tension and suspense to evoke future change, and using images that have undergone significant changes in meaning throughout time.

The use of the image of Hongi Hika’s moko to evoke the period of contact between Māori and Europeans has already been discussed, but another image that functions in a similar way is the upoko tuhituhi. This also evokes the time of cultural upheaval, during which the traditional Māori practice of preserving heads was distorted and ultimately abandoned. They can also be seen as an exploration of how the meanings of images change over time. An example of this is Camp Fire (2008, Fig. 13), in which five versions of a photographed image of one upoko tuhituhi appear in a row along the middle of the painting. Each version has been digitally stretched, cropped and resized differently then projected onto the canvas for Cotton to paint from, with the smallest on the left leading to the largest on the right. They are all very grainy in appearance and are rendered in blue and black against the pale background. The effect of the same image being continually altered as it moves away from the viewer suggests a constantly changing view of the same historical object. This relates to the idea that the ways in which the image of an upoko tuhituhi is perceived and understood would differ depending on the historical context along with the cultural background of the viewer. Rather than seeing the issue clearly and in full, today our perceptions are distorted, coloured and flattened by our current context and temporal distance from its origins.

Cotton also focuses on the future in some paintings, moving away from exploring past transformations in order to evoke ideas of change extending into the future. Due to the infinite and undetermined nature of the future tense, many of his works that evoke this concept do not include any imagery from the past in order to leave the timeframe open and unspecified. Much in the same way that universality was achieved through an absence of particular place, the future is more clearly evoked when referents to a particular time are also absent. The example of Takarangi (2007, Fig. 12) illustrates how non-specified time lends itself to evoking the future. Here, the rock and bird images are both emblems of continuity through past, present and future, as they undergo only very slight, almost imperceptible changes compared to the constant flux of human existence. Both also appear stretched, with attenuated lines in the rock face and the feathers of the birds. This gives a sense of movement, as though the birds are being propelled along the direction of

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these lengthened lines. Lynne Seear explains that Cotton “works in Photoshop to distort and accentuate the illusion of movement in the birds’ bodies and wings, exaggerating their suspension and creating visible tension.” The propulsion acting on them is unseen however, and is affecting them all in different ways, as some appear to be falling while others look to be pulled upwards or sideways. This results in a particular kind of tension and mystery, which leads the viewer to wonder what will happen next. As Justin Paton describes the painting: “The light that remains has the strangeness of a full eclipse, when it is day and night simultaneously… There’s no mistaking the atmosphere of suspense: these skies feel tense, crackling, primed. Something is about to happen.” It is this sense of suspense that provokes contemplation of the future, as the viewer imagines how this strange scene would move and change through time.

Another method of portraying change through time appears in Hole in the Rock (2010, Fig. 18), in which two bird images are juxtaposed one on top of the other. The image on top is similar in appearance to the birds from the 2007 series, rendered simply in red and black with rough detailing of beak, eye and feathers. The image underneath appears to be the same bird, but with no black and no internal detail, just a bright red silhouette outlined in white, and rotated slightly in relation to the other. This gives the effect of a sudden electrocution, as if the bird was hanging in the air one moment and struck by a strange kind of lightening the next. There is a clear sense of two points in time being shown simultaneously, like two photographs taken one after the other and then overlaid. In this way, the boundaries between the different tenses are blurred by depicting more than one together.

Hole in the Rock also features airbrushed red writing: freehand capital letters spelling out Māori words, some clearly legible while others are crossed out, scribbled over, or simply too faint to make out. Those that can be read include ‘I TE,’ ‘KOPIKOPIKO,’ HAEREERE,’ and ‘WHENUA.’ These are fragments of a biblical extract, from Zechariah in Te Paipera Tapu:

6:7 I haere atu ano nga mea pakaka, i whai kia haereere, kia kopikopiko ratou i te whenua: na ka mea ia, Haere atu koe, kopikopiko i te whenua. Na kei te kopikopiko ratou i te whenua.

30 Justin Paton, “In the Air: Shane Cotton’s recent paintings.” in Shane Cotton: To and Fro (London: Rossi & Rossi, 2010), 11.
31 Zechariah 6:7 (Paipera Tapu).
6:7 And the bay went forth, and sought to go that they might walk to and fro through the earth: and he said, Get you hence, walk to and fro through the earth. So they walked to and fro through the earth.32

The inclusion of this biblical reference draws a parallel between Hole in the Rock and many of the other paintings shown in the 2010 ‘To and Fro’ exhibition that featured another biblical verse, from the Book of Job. This verse also spoke about walking to and fro through the earth; moving through both space and time. The way the words seem to haphazardly emerge and recede from view gives the effect of reading them across a vast distance: spatial or temporal or both. It also recalls past relationships with text. Robert Jahnke describes the historical Māori attitudes toward the newly introduced concept of writing, where “such was the magic of text that voices could transcend the distance of time and space on a piece of paper or a Cotton surface.”33 Here Cotton has heightened the sense of writing as giving voice to those from a different time by painting the text ‘in the air’ and in a loose freehand style rather than in a neat typed font, with some words fading away as if lost in the wind.

He takes words that remind the viewer of the past period of missionary influence on Māori and brings them into the present through the creation of a distinctly contemporary aesthetic. This look is achieved through the use of acrylic paints, airbrushing techniques and the digital appearance of the rock and birds with their sharp contrasts and distorted flatness. Robert Leonard aptly described Cotton’s work as “literally and conceptually dark, folding past into present to affect a prophetic voice.”34 This prophetic voice is a reference to the element of the future in his works (as prophecy is future oriented). Cotton’s ability to incorporate elements of the past into his very contemporary art practice gives his work forward momentum as viewers contemplate the future that is anticipated in the paintings. This unification of all elements of time within Cotton’s paintings again recalls the Māori notion of time as cyclical.

The dynamic appearance of the words in Hole in the Rock also brings to mind the change that the bible has undergone through time and various translations in different languages. The adaption process and the way Cotton depicts it is described by Paton, who suggests that:

Cotton’s achievement … is to evoke this process from the inside – the way the prayer was spoken and memorised by new readers, gaining and shedding meanings as it went. We

32 Zechariah 6:7 (King James Version).
33 Jahnke, “Voices Beyone the Pae.” 11.
seem to be inhabiting the prayer as someone translates and reimagines it – underlining words, crossing out others, obliterating some in clouds of red mist.”

This process of change has been made quite pronounced, with lettering visible beneath the shrouds of obscuring red paint; drawing attention to the process the painting itself went through. The cloudy sky was painted first, followed by the words, some of which were later covered over. This is not a highly finished painting in which the process of its making is concealed as much as possible, rather the nature of painting as an inherently time-based medium is emphasised.

**Painting through time**

Much has been written about the significance of Cotton’s chosen medium of painting in the contemporary context. It is the oldest and most firmly established traditional form of art making alongside sculpture, and this fact alone may lend the image an almost anachronistic quality. This is one reason among many that painting’s relevance in contemporary art practice has been questioned in recent times, and the medium has suffered a crisis internationally: as Haarhaus mentions, it was even “declared “dead” at the pitch of debate.” All this leads to the question of why Cotton chooses to continue painting as he has done since the 1980s. In analysing his work, it becomes clear that Cotton’s choice of medium, along with the way in which he utilises it, is itself an intentional exploration of time in art, especially in relation to other mediums prevalent in the contemporary art context. French writes that:

> Cotton’s paintings also clearly evidence the labour of the artist … this issue of work … concerns duration – the production of work in and through time – as well as the relationship established between the artist and viewer in the presence of the artwork … Cotton’s painterliness can be posited as a rejoinder to other industrial/postindustrial models of artistic production that identify the artist primarily in terms of concept development and production management; models in which the time and space of the artwork’s production do not necessarily accord with the artist’s experiences of time and space.”

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35 Paton, “In the Air.” 14.
The reference to postindustrial models of art production here recalls the medium of photography, where the artwork often consists of an image located in a single point of (past) time. It may be this ‘frozen’ element of photography that provides the difference in the relationship between artist and viewer that French mentions, as the viewer usually does not see evidence of the artist’s production of the photographic artwork through time. Rather, viewers are presented with what appears to be single moment of time, static and unchanging.

In contrast to the instantaneous nature of image creation in much of photography, especially the digital variety, a single painting by Cotton can take months to reach completion after much development: as Cotton described in a 2011 interview, “… you make this image, you reflect on it and quite often it travels quite a way from the original idea, because the painting takes over.”\(^{41}\) This evolution is often readily apparent in his work, with subsequent additions and layers of paint quite evident in works such as *Hole in the Rock*. Because we all experience time as a continuous flow of change, perhaps the ability to see how the work developed over time attributes to a more personal relationship between creator and viewer: one that is more in accordance with the artist’s (and viewer’s) experience of time. As Barton points out:

… painting, unlike photography, takes time. A painting does not capture an instant that has already passed, but memorializes an encounter that has been acted out. Somewhere in this difference lies the hope that a feeling thread connects what once was to the action of representing it, granting a special purchase on the past, despite [painting’s] troubled history.\(^{42}\)

Painting’s embodiment of an acted encounter is what differentiates it here, and this is what is heightened in Cotton’s works. The emphasised element of duration in the creation of his paintings also relates to the very themes of time and change that are explored within them. In fact, the theme of transformation was initially inspired by the act of painting itself, as Cotton states in 2007 that “[the idea of transformation] first came about by looking at the process of painting itself and then thinking about how that might lead thematically to notions of what we are ourselves becoming and where we are going.”\(^{43}\) This illustrates how the medium in which Cotton works is significant in terms of the themes of change and transformation through time that he also handles in the content.

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42 Barton, “Return of the Dead.” unpaginated.
French writes that his paintings “stand against the instantaneous as a dominant mode of cultural experience…and collectively cut against the current vogue for multi-media diversity within singular practices…” But it would be inaccurate to situate Cotton in direct opposition to the instantaneous forms of cultural expression such as photography and film, as he has long incorporated elements of these forms within his work. His practice is not constrained by the old and traditional form of painting’s technology, rather he integrates new technologies throughout the art-making process to enrich and enliven the medium. As Haarhaus wrote in 2007, “the new look of the work has come about mainly through the practice itself, which Cotton wants “to keep in the moment… and be relevant.” From appropriating imagery from other contemporary artists working in all kinds of mediums, to downloading stock photographs found on the internet, manipulating them in Photoshop and projecting them onto the canvas, to using relatively new tools and products such as spray guns and acrylic paints: Cotton uses contemporary technology frequently and as a central element in his practice.

He also regularly references popular culture and the current cultural context of endlessly reproduced images. An example of this is Easy Forever Forever Easy (2011, Fig. 22), a work in acrylics in which the title of the 1969 film ‘Easy Rider’ is airbrushed in red Gothic script along the top of the painting. Underneath is a rock face in greyscale, which appears to be painted from a photograph that has been digitally altered. Overlaid on this rock is a black silhouette of a robed woman, detailed simply with white lines. This image is derived from a more detailed version in his 2010 painting Mother Mother (Fig. 21), in which the woman is clearly a representation of the Virgin Mary and is painted in white with black detailing against a dark background. This image was in turn taken from a stock photograph of a Virgin Mary statue available on Google Images. Therefore, in one painting Cotton has used recycled imagery originally sourced from the internet, photographs that he digitally altered using modern software, acrylic paints and airbrushing tools, and references to contemporary popular culture and film technology. This shows that Cotton is hardly a traditionalist in his use of a conventional medium, but is indeed very much a part of his own temporal context in the postindustrial, digital age.

His characteristic re-using of imagery from past works is also related to the way he unifies past and present. This has been recognised by Cree, who interviewed Cotton in 2008 and wrote:

Time, in Maori culture, he tells me, is very much “in the moment,” and even stories about the past are told in the present tense. This is perhaps one reason for his desire to return to earlier works, to look again at targets or combinations of text and image … producing new works that, as he says, “stretch the imagery out.”

This relates to his re-use of the exact same bird images through many different paintings; the concentric circles that appear in much the same form across the decade; the figure of Mary that was painted in Mother Mother, Easy Forever Forever Easy, and again in Reach of 2012 (Fig. 26); and many other recycled motifs. Although his practice has undergone several emphatic shifts in style and content over the course of his career to date, he continually references back to past works. Haarhaus notes that ‘to trace the trajectory of Cotton’s style and iconography is to find both consistency and change; repetition and evolution.’ In this way, the unification of past and present is reiterated within his own art practice as an element of continuity along with change through time.

**Perceptions of temporality**

Along with time in the making of art and in its content, Cotton has also long been interested in how time is perceived. Time is inherently subjective due to its abstract and ephemeral nature, and can therefore be experienced very differently in certain contexts. It can seem to move very quickly (‘time flies’) or slowly (‘time dragged on’), and can also affect the appearance of objects moving through space. This concept has influenced Cotton, most notably in the ‘Red Shift’ series of 2007. ‘Red Shift’ refers to the phenomenon that occurs as a result of the Doppler effect that is studied in physics, where light-emitting bodies moving away from the viewer appear more towards the red end of the colour spectrum. This is due to the wavelength of the light being stretched out by the relative motion, leading to a lower frequency of the perceived light, which appears more towards the red end of the spectrum because red is the colour with the lowest visible

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It is this subjective and relativistic experience of movement through space and time that is explored in the ‘Red Shift’ series. Justin Paton describes how these paintings “perform the painterly equivalent of dropping the viewer off the cliff. Rock faces rush past uncomfortably close, their surfaces stretched by the speed of the descent.”\(^{50}\) Of course, the paintings are completely still - there is no speed of descent. But the attenuated lines of rock and birds give the effect of movement through time, influencing the viewer’s perceptions.

This illusion of movement contrasts with the reality of perfect stillness, creating a tension between the flow of time and stasis. The tension between opposing forces in this series is described by Haarhaus, who writes that these paintings catch attention because of “their deliberate play on time; their captivation of the moment between – the past and the future, this way and that way and, yes, life and death.”\(^{51}\) These opposing ideas relate to the ambiguity of the paintings, with their lack of specified time or place that leads to a sense of being in between states.

The medium used again becomes relevant here, because not only does it relate to time in making but also to time in viewing. As Barton so perceptively notes, “Cotton’s paintings act on the viewing subject; they take time and arrest it.”\(^{52}\) This recalls the idea of the illusion of movement (which requires time) within a still and timeless frame, but also suggests that his works encourage long contemplation despite being still images. This stimulation through time is achieved in several different ways, such as the multiple layers in Cotton’s works, the complex symbolism that invite interpretation, text that compels one to read, translate and understand, and so on. But it is also a result of Cotton’s choice to paint. Blair French describes how painting is:

> ...a medium of overt tactility and relatively attenuated temporality. Running counter to the contemporary cult of high-paced, visual instantaneity, in which a dynamically mediated world delivers pre-packaged content for the tired eye, such work seeks to slow and lengthen the act of looking…\(^{53}\)

The tactility mentioned here again brings up the element of human-scale experiences of time and space that paintings reflect, along with the personal nature of an object that is

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\(^{50}\) Paton, “In the Air.” 11.

\(^{51}\) Haarhaus, “Flight Paths,” 49.

\(^{52}\) Barton, “Return of the Dead,” unpaginated.

clearly made by the hand of an artist. This is rare in today’s culture that is saturated with
digital and machine-manufactured images and objects. Advertising and visual
entertainment in television, film, magazines, billboards and on the internet all feature
visual images that seek to impart the maximum amount of information as quickly as
possible. On the whole, the most prevalent still images are not intended for long scrutiny,
and moving images encountered daily are not intended for in depth contemplation during
the time of viewing. Taking time to consider, interpret and reflect on encountered images
is mostly not encouraged in these very common contexts.

This widespread speed of looking is counteracted by paintings such as Cotton’s,
which deny an immediate transmission of meaning, instead requiring time for the viewer
to ‘take it all in.’ Painting’s relation to time has been questioned recently, with Barton
asking “how do you incorporate time and encode memory in a medium that’s visual and
immediate?” But although painting is undeniably visual, it is also tactile (as already noted
by French), and it can be argued that it is not immediate at all. A single, momentary
 glance at a painting does not often satisfy an interested viewer. Rather, they are likely to
stand in front of it for a while, scanning each element of the image; perhaps stepping
forward to gain a clearer view of a particular detail before stepping back again to absorb
the work as a whole, all the while considering various aspects and potential messages and
meanings. This is the ‘attenuated temporality’ that French mentions and what sets
painting apart from the every day mass-produced image.

Justin Paton has observed resistance to this attenuated temporality however, where
viewers desire immediate satisfaction from painting:

No-one sits down with a new film or CD and demands straight away to know what it
means, but we have this strange habit of treating paintings as if they were puzzles to be
solved, rather than experiences to be inhabited and unfolded over time. I suspect this
desire for one catch-all explanation is really a kind of impatience, an attempt to shortcut
the slowed-down attention that any good painting demands (and rewards).54

This is most likely a consequence of the contemporary reality of living with a
bombardment of images that are made to be understood as quickly as possible. Although
it is common for viewers to want to understand paintings in the same manner, it is likely
fair to say that the most value still comes from giving a painting time and treating it like
an experience rather than a mechanism to be quickly decoded. Cotton’s paintings reward
those who take time with them because they are both simple and endlessly complex:
typically made up of only a few elements but open to infinite possible interpretations and

meanings. There is always something more to notice or consider, if one takes the time to look.

To conclude, this chapter has discussed how Cotton symbolises time, through motifs such as birds, concentric circles, skulls and other *memento mori*. He uses these and other techniques to represent varying aspects of time, such as past, present and future, and differing cultural constructions of time: namely the Pākehā linear view and the Māori cyclical view of time. The theme of change and transformation over time was explored in relation to past societal change, transformation in meanings over time, and changing objects portrayed in multiple points of time simultaneously. The significance of painting was discussed in terms of the involvement of time in its making, and in the viewing of art within the contemporary context.
III

Biculturalism in Aotearoa New Zealand

The World Turned Upside Down

His tongue stumbled, he was hard to understand
Did they understand? ‘He was quite mad?’
Certainly he was strange:
Jesus Christ mixed
with Papa, who ‘turned the world upside down’.

- Kendrick Smithyman¹

Shane Cotton is both a painter of the unique form of biculturalism that exists in Aotearoa New Zealand and a product of it himself. Of both Māori and Pākehā descent, he was raised in a predominantly European suburb of Upper Hutt with long summer holidays spent in Northland where his father’s ancestral marae is located, giving him a “dual cultural heritage.”² This heritage has regularly featured in his paintings and because of this they have long been treated as “arenas of bicultural exploration,” with Blair French going on to note that they “picture negotiations between cultures (their languages, their representations, their gods and their stories)...”³ The bicultural exploration of space, place and time in his work have already been discussed in the previous chapters, but Cotton applies this dual view to almost all other elements of his paintings, making biculturalism one of the central themes in his work. He explained in 2010, “the subject of hybridity is an ongoing interest. Whether it’s in relation to history, identity, religion or culture.”⁴

This chapter will examine several aspects of this hybridity and biculturalism, firstly in terms the common symbols and narratives of cultural hybridity that feature in his works. One of the major elements of this, bispirituality, will then be singled out for more

in depth exploration due to its continual importance in Cotton’s works throughout the decade. Another central theme within biculturalism is the use of language and text in his painting, and this will be covered in the final part of this chapter in regards to Cotton’s use of two languages, their combination, and the function of incoherency in reception.

**Bicultural symbols and narratives**

As Ngāhiraka Mason notes: “Concerned with the complexity of New Zealand’s colonial past and bi-cultural identity, Cotton’s paintings incorporate references to both Māori and Pākehā culture through a vast lexicon of signs, symbols and words.”\(^5\) He does not simply reference both cultures individually however, but often combines them or uses symbols, signs and motifs that embody both cultures. For example, the concentric circles motif that was discussed in the previous chapter as a symbol of the distinctly Māori view of cyclical time is also often read as a target, of Western origins. Robert Leonard describes them as “bull’s-eye targets that recall British airforce insignia as well as Jasper Johns and Kenneth Noland target paintings,”\(^6\) while John Daly-Peoples also noted the local influence of these, where “the bullseye shape in these later works stylistically derive from the American pop artists as well as New Zealand artist Julian Dashper…”\(^7\) Due to their close resemblance to Dashper’s drum kit paintings, Cotton has been said to appropriate imagery from Pākehā artists in a reverse of the practice that came under scrutiny during the 1990s.\(^8\)

It was during this time that Pākehā artists such as Gordon Walters and Dick Frizzell were criticised for using traditional Māori imagery in the form of the tiki or the koru and treating these “sacred symbols as abstract sources for design, without regard to the ancient spiritual meaning of the form.”\(^9\) Because of this, as Strongman explains:

> the arguments about appropriation which whistled through the halls of New Zealand’s art academy in the early 1990s were primarily concerned with the cultural propriety of Pākehā artists drawing from the works of customary Māori artists, rather than any other transaction of imagery.\(^{10}\)

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\(^5\) Mason, “Shane Cotton.” 56.
\(^8\) Strongman, “Ruarangi.” 21.
\(^9\) Ibid., 28.
\(^{10}\) Ibid., 21.
Cotton’s use of Pākehā artists’ imagery subverts this dynamic while also drawing a parallel between his art and that of the Māori folk artists, who used images borrowed from Pākehā sources to decorate the interior of various wharenui during the 19th century. In this way, he continues an old practice of Māori cross-cultural borrowing while also exploring contemporary dynamics of biculturalism within the fine art context.

Many other symbols that have so far been discussed in purely Māori terms have also been interpreted within a Pākehā cultural framework. For instance, Strongman points out that the white bird symbolising Taiāmai can also be read as “a white phoenix rising from the ashes, a Western symbol of rebirth and new power: elsewhere it is pictured in Cotton’ works variously as a great white albatross, a kotuku or white heron…and an American eagle.” The use of an American eagle in paintings such as Kikorangi (2003) supports this idea of the image having dual meanings that encompass both Māori and Pākehā narratives, as the American eagle is a distinctly non-Māori bird. The other symbol of Taiāmai, a rock, can likewise be read on foreign terms. Lynne Seear mentions that the intricately rendered cliff face in Red Shift (2006-7, Fig. 11) is “appropriated by the artist from photographs of the Grand Canyon, itself the site of copious myths about the collisions of worlds.”

These target, bird and rock symbols are all highly ambiguous and encompass dual cultural readings due to their very broad range of possible significations, but Cotton also specifically references the unification and synthesis of Māori and Pākehā cultures, where the boundaries between them are blurred. An example of an element in his painting that combines both Māori and Pākehā cultures is his extensive use of blue. His characteristic shades of sky, electric and deep blue first appeared in the 2003 diptychs, in works including Broken Water, Pouerua, and Kikorangi, where in the latter, the title itself is the Māori word for blue (kikorangi). Cotton has explained that he started using blue:

... because of the word ‘kikorangi’. I sometimes use biblical scripture in my work and I referenced Genesis – that moment, that Christian moment, of the beginning of humanity, where life on earth as we know it unfolds. In the Māori translation the word for firmament is kikorangi, which I think is a really interesting word. Kikorangi is the colour blue. But it’s made up of two words – ‘kiko’ is flesh and ‘rangi’ is sky...”

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12 Ibid., 24-25.
From this we learn that Māori denote ‘blue’ as the flesh of the sky, which is also how ‘firmament’ is understood. This dual use of the word kikorangi therefore provides a link between Cotton’s use of blue and Christianity, through a uniquely Māori way of conceptualising both the colour and the religious notion of a solid vault above the Earth, as the flesh of the sky.

The painting in which this link is most explicit is Broken Water (2003, Fig. 5). This diptych features a faint figure of Jesus with arms outstretched on the left, and a large upoko tuhituhi rendered in two tones of blue in a camouflage pattern on the right. A thick airbrushed white line resembling a glowing neon light extends across both canvases, as does highly ornate gothic text in blue that spells out ‘Takauere,’ the name of the Ngā Puhi taniwha that lives under Lake Omapere in Taiāmai. Strongman writes that by “pairing the image of the upoko tuhituhi with the Jesus figure, and the name of the taniwha with the pure beam of light, Cotton draws a parallel between the two belief systems: the work posits a similarly iconic invocation of death and rebirth shared by Christianity and Māori ancestral tradition.” This acknowledgement of the relationship between Māori and Christianity is enhanced by the small text that is written along the top edge of the left half: ‘Kia whai kikorangi.’ This is an excerpt from the Māori translation of an early verse in Genesis:

1:6 Na ka mea te Atua, Kia whai kikorangi a waenganui o nga wai, hei wehe i waenganui o nga wai.\(^{16}\)

1:6 And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.\(^{17}\)

Cotton illustrates a bit of visual wordplay here, as he paints the ‘kiko’ (flesh) part of the word in orange and ‘rangi’ (sky) in blue, emphasising the composite nature of the translation of ‘firmament.’ This is reflected in the blue colouring of the upoko tuhituhi: creating blue, or sky-coloured, flesh.

From the time of these diptychs up until 2007, blue featured heavily in his palette, but no more so than in the 2005 ‘Pararaiha’ series that was exhibited at Sherman Galleries in Sydney. One of these paintings, After NZ II (2005, Fig. 8), features a figure in Māori clothing, an upoko tuhituhi, and what appears to be a signature off to the left, reading ‘Barnet Burns.’ These three elements are painted on top of a flat, unvarying field of solid azure blue that covers the remaining surface of the canvas. As mentioned in the previous

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\(^{15}\) Strongman, “Ruarangi.” 15.

\(^{16}\) Genesis 1:6 (Paipera Tapu).

\(^{17}\) Genesis 1:6 (King James Version).
chapter, the use of glowing electric blue can have a modernising effect, but this is a much different shade that is utilised in a much different way. Rather than illuminating certain images against a dark background, here the blue seems to be the air all around the images: the very atmosphere that contains them. This is consistent with the use of blue that is inspired by the concept of firmament/kikorangi, which also recalls the phenomenon of new ideas being translated into existing languages.

This narrative of early cultural contact and the exchange of ideas are also referenced in After NZ II through the figure along with the text that identifies him as Barnet Burns. The figure of Burns was an English sailor and trader who first arrived in New Zealand around 1830,\textsuperscript{18} during the time when a ‘middle ground’ existed between the two cultures, according to Vincent O’Malley.\textsuperscript{19} He posits that for the few decades between 1814 and 1840, both Māori and Pākehā had a “mutual need of the other,”\textsuperscript{20} leading to a fairly even power dynamic between them and a relatively balanced form of biculturalism. Burns symbolises this period, as he was a ‘Pākehā-Māori’ – an Englishman who lived amongst Te Aitanga-ā-Māhaki and underwent the tā moko process.\textsuperscript{21} Strongman notes that “Burns’ story provides a strange kind of symmetry with that of Hongi Hika, who famously travelled to England and, dressed in European clothes over his customary attire, had an audience with King George IV: although their journeys, according to Cotton, unravelled in opposite and very different directions…”\textsuperscript{22} In this way, both Barnet Burns and Hongi Hika are symbols of the time of a more balanced biculturalism in Aotearoa New Zealand, when some Pākehā spoke Māori, lived amongst iwi, gained moko and wore traditional Māori clothing, just as some Māori spoke English, lived amongst the Europeans and wore traditional Western clothing.

This period of relative equality between Māori and Pākehā did not last long however, as the Europeans quickly gained independence after 1840 with an influx of settlers and the establishment of the British government, which led to an imbalance of power and imposed compliance with British laws, customs and culture.\textsuperscript{23} The sharp decline in Māori population at this time, caused primarily by aggravated warfare and

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 96.
\textsuperscript{22} Strongman, “Visions and Revisions,” 53.
\textsuperscript{23} O’Malley, The Meeting Place, 229.
introduced diseases, exacerbated this power imbalance. O’Malley writes that the relationship between the cultures based on mutual reciprocity and respect was completely gone by 1860, replaced by a “vigorous policy of assimilation aimed at eradicating Māori culture, and serious socio-economic disruption resulting from the impacts of confiscation and the Native Land Court.”

Cotton’s references to the peaceful aspect of historical biculturalism contrasts with symbols that represent this subsequent conflict between the two peoples, such as those mentioned by Justin Paton in his description of the imagery in the 2010 ‘To and Fro’ series:

There’s a statue of Virgin Mary, dispensing graces with her hands outstretched. There’s the long silhouette of a nineteenth-century musket. And there’s a mokomokai or Upoko tūhituhi, one of the tattooed heads that were preserved by Maori for ritual purposes and later, very controversially, sold to European collectors. Considered on its own, each of these items reads as a piece of evidence of cross-cultural encounter… These items read not only as evidence of cross-cultural encounter, but evidence of the negative effects of the imbalance between cultures. The Virgin Mary statue of Mother Mother (2010, Fig. 21) represents Christianity and evokes the missionaries’ suppression of indigenous beliefs. The musket in Sons of God(s) (2010, Fig. 19) recalls intensified warfare due to imported weapons; and the upoko tūhituhi in Smashing Myths (2010, Fig. 20) represents the irreversible destruction of traditional practices.

This great power imbalance along with the rapid decline in Māori population led many Pākehā to assume that the entire Māori race would eventually die out, or would at the least become entirely assimilated. O’Malley writes that:

Even those Pākehā who believed that there was some hope for Māori due to the higher place occupied by them on the Victorian racial hierarchy than many other indigenous peoples considered it axiomatic that the key to their survival was their rapid and complete adoption of European lifestyles. Māori culture would have to die in order for its people to survive.

This shows that the two-way exchange of cultural influences in Aotearoa New Zealand had transformed into the Pākehā-dominated biculturalism that still exists today, albeit in a much different form. One common element between then and now is that it is only Māori who are expected to be functionally bicultural with an understanding of both languages and worldviews, while there is little to no pressure on Pākehā to be knowledgeable of te

24 O’Malley, The Meeting Place, 231
25 Ibid.
26 Justin Paton, “In the Air: Shane Cotton’s recent paintings.” in Shane Cotton: To and Fro (London: Rossi & Rossi, 2010), 12.
27 O’Malley, The Meeting Place, 232.
reo me ngā tikanga Māori (Māori language and customs). In O’Malley’s words, “the middle ground was long gone, and Māori were instead expected to straddle the two cultures on their own.”

Cotton often reverses this unbalanced dynamic of historical and contemporary biculturalism in his paintings. He does this by centring his work firmly within a Māori framework with frequent use of te reo Māori and explicitly Māori cultural references. The many elements of Pākehā culture are then brought into this distinctly Māori context rather than vice versa. This has led some critics to interpret Cotton’s work as solely Māori rather than bicultural, with Ewen McDonald stating that Cotton’s quotation of Pākehā and international art icons can be considered as:

... a provocative reversal of European assimilation – just as Picasso and Braque exploited African culture in their quest for a new way of painting, Shane Cotton synthesises identifiable and key references from contemporary Western art into a proudly Māori/local setting. In other words, putting the world – the global network of art – firmly in HIS place. Slightly

However, it can be argued that this is still a bicultural artistic practice (especially considering Cotton’s frequent portrayal of cultural synthesis rather than separation), but one that does privilege the Māori standpoint in a deliberate reversal of the historical reality.

Bispirituality

One particular aspect of biculturalism that embodies both the suppression of Māori culture and its synthesis with Pākehā culture is spirituality. Many aspects of customary Māori ways of life were repressed by the influence of the Christian missionaries, who pushed for widespread acceptance of their worldview and system of morality. Because of this, European attempts to convert Māori to Christianity were closely intertwined with the desire to assimilate them culturally. On the other hand, many aspects of traditional Māori culture were retained and expressed in new syncretic faiths that combined Māori cosmology with elements of the Judeo-Christian religion. Cotton has long explored both religious oppression and synthesis in his works, focussing on the context of Northland from the late 1990s onwards. As Bishop-Jahnke notes, “his investigation into his heritage has provided him with an elaborate vocabulary of syncretic symbols and motifs with

28 O’Malley, The Meeting Place, 232.
29 Ewen McDonald, Shane Cotton: Square Style (Sydney: Mori Gallery, 1997), unpaginated.
which to demonstrate that impact of Christianity on Taitokerau art and culture.”

Cotton has described the resulting conflation of Māori and Christian belief systems as ‘bispirituality’ – a variant of biculturalism.

Northland was a crucial area for the spread of Christian influence amongst Māori, with the first permanent missionary settlement in Aotearoa New Zealand established at Rangihoua in the Bay of Islands in 1814 under the protection of a local Ngāpuhi chief, Ruatara. Evangelising did not go smoothly at first however, as with Ruatara’s premature death the following year, his uncle Hongi Hika took over his role as protector of the missionaries and continued to both provide for them and guard them jealously until his death in 1828. For this period, the missionaries were isolated, entirely dependent on Hika, and faced with complete disinterest from local Māori towards their Christian message. They had not begun teaching Māori to read and were still trying to learn the Maori language themselves, so progress in communicating the gospel after the first decade was almost negligible.

In fact, O’Malley quotes Francis Hall, a Church Missionary Society recruit who wrote in 1822 that northern Māori “look upon us with contempt: they disregard what we say, have no respect to our feelings…” and in the same year James Shepherd recorded that many missionaries “seem to have fallen into the mine of this place, and instead of Evangelizing the Heathen, are themselves becoming Heathen.” This shows that during this period, the conventional beliefs of Māori were still dominant within Aotearoa New Zealand.

After Hika’s death, the missionaries were able to reach a greater audience and began to encounter genuine Māori interest in Christianity. From this time onwards, conversion rates increased rapidly, most likely caused by a combination of factors including “improved missionary ability in the Māori language, the greater availability of Testaments and other printed materials, a lessening of missionary economic and political dependence on Māori, and the expansion of mission stations throughout the country in the

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32 O’Malley, _The Meeting Place_, 77.
33 Ibid.
35 O’Malley, _The Meeting Place_, 79.
36 Ibid., 78.
37 Ibid., 83.
The spread of literacy was a particularly motivating factor, as learning to read and write quickly became a highly coveted skill as “many Māori assumed that the key to accessing new forms of knowledge lay in the written word, and literacy became part of the new currency of tribal prestige and mana.”

The missionaries only gave instruction in how to read and write Te Reo Māori, and restricted the printing of texts in Māori to their religious scriptures, effectively limiting the content of what Māori were able to read in order to ensure familiarity with the biblical texts. This was, at least superficially, very successful in converting large numbers of Māori to Christianity. But the practice of translating Christian concepts using words that already had pre-existing meanings within Māori belief systems led to a uniquely Māori understanding of Christianity that was not what the missionaries had intended to promote.

O’Malley notes that “seeking to make Christianity readily attractive to Māori, they adopted terms such as ‘Atua’ for God, ‘karakia’ for prayer, ‘Tapu’ for Holy, immediately placing the Christian faith within a deeply Māori context.”

For example, using the word ‘Atua’ for God meant that many Māori understood the Christian God as an addition to the many atua already recognised in the Māori pantheon. The concept of monotheism was not clearly expressed through the use of this word, and many Māori continued to acknowledge the existence of multiple atua, including the Christian God, after they had been officially ‘converted.’ This example of Christianity being “filtered through Māori cultural frameworks” is portrayed in many of Cotton’s paintings, such as Sons of God(s) (2010, Fig. 19). This work consists of a dark skyscape with murky cloud formations, over which a black silhouette of a musket stretches across the canvas. A tangle of curving white lines rises up like smoke from the end of the barrel, recalling doodled manaia-like forms. In the red, airbrushed handwriting of the other paintings from the period are the words of the title: SONS OF GOD(s). ‘Sons of God’ is a phrase used several times in the Hebrew Bible (which was introduced to Māori as the Christian Old Testament). Significantly, the phrase appears in the first verse of the passage from the Book of Job that inspired Cotton’s ‘To and Fro’ series of 2010:

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38 O’Malley, The Meeting Place, 166.
39 Ibid., 167.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid., 168.
42 Ibid., 178.
43 Ibid., 34.
1:6 Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan came also among them.\textsuperscript{44}

The ‘Sons of God’ phrase is interpreted as referring to “divine beings, who were with God at the creation and now make up his heavenly council,”\textsuperscript{45} or guardian angels.\textsuperscript{46} They are recognised as “holdovers from the heavenly courts of ancient Near Eastern mythology,”\textsuperscript{47} which was largely polytheistic and strongly influenced the early Judaic religion.\textsuperscript{48} Cotton references the incongruity between the imported monotheism and both early Judaic and conventional Māori polytheism by adding a small ‘s’ in brackets after ‘God’. This also suggests that Māori faith after conversion was still a combination of the European religion, particularly Jewish elements, and pre-existing beliefs. In this way they were both sons of God (Yahweh) and gods (ngā atua).\textsuperscript{49} The black musket gives the painting an ominous mood and recalls the Musket Wars, which took place in the early decades of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, around the same time as the initial establishment of Christian missions. Missionaries were even known to trade muskets with Māori for pigs and potatoes, despite preaching peace and opposing the inter-tribal warfare.\textsuperscript{50}

The complex fusion of new and old beliefs was most striking in the Māori syncretic faiths that began to form after the introduction of Christianity in Aotearoa New Zealand. One such movement sprung up in Te Tai Tokerau around 1833, led by the prophet Papahurihia, who was originally a chief of the Rangihoua region with the given name Penetana.\textsuperscript{51} Also known as Te Atua Wera (The Fiery God), Papahurihia claimed to be the mouthpiece of a spirit called Te Nākahi, which was the term used to translate ‘serpent’ in the Māori version of the Bible. Bronwyn Elsmore explains that “as Aotearoa had no snakes, and therefore no word for such a creature, the missionaries took the Hebrew term Nahash and formed the transliteration ‘Nākahi’.”\textsuperscript{52} This spirit was understood as a “creature positioned somewhere between the biblical serpent of Genesis and the eel guardians of the Ngāpuhi people.”\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{44} Job 1:6 (King James Version).
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 891.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{49} Not intended to exclude the Māori women of faith here: there were of course both sons and daughters of God(s).
\textsuperscript{50} O’Malley, The Meeting Place, 79.
\textsuperscript{51} Elsmore, Mana From Heaven, 22.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 23.
\textsuperscript{53} Strongman, “Ruarangi.” 26.
Papahurihia’s influence spread rapidly throughout Northland, with hundreds of followers by 1837. The movement combined certain elements of the missionaries’ Christian teachings with traditional Māori beliefs. Elsmore writes that:

From the introduced religion the prophet took the new notions of the raising of the dead, the existence of Satan, an afterlife divided into two spheres, the practice of baptism as symbolizing membership in the new society, and the holding of regular services of worship. The prophet and his followers also identified strongly with the story of the Jewish people in the Bible: they observed the Sabbath on the Saturday rather than Sunday and even referred to themselves as ‘Hūrai’ (Jews). Aside from these Christian and Judaic influences, many other characteristics of the religion were, as O’Malley writes, “identifiably Māori in origin, and Te Atua Wera himself appears to have reverted to the more customary role of respected tohunga figure in the Hokianga district long after interest in his new creed had peaked in the late 1830s.”

Cotton often references this unique syncretic faith, as it is a remarkable example of cultural hybridity and bispirituality in Aotearoa New Zealand, and particularly in Te Tai Tokerau. An example of this is Blackout Movement (2001), the title of which was also the name of his solo exhibition at the Gow Langsford Gallery in Auckland in the same year. ‘Blackout Movement’ refers to a later revival of the original Papahurihia movement that emerged in Hokianga in 1898 in a reaction to government legislation, invoking the spirit of Te Atua Wera. It was known as the ‘Blackout Movement’ for its “spiritualist-type meetings held in darkness,” where the leader would summon the spirit with a strange whistling voice, the sound of which was reported to move around the room mysteriously and at times “appeared to take physical form, fluttering though the air.” The painting Blackout Movement also features the Lord’s Prayer written out in Māori sixteen times down the right hand side of the painting, again recalling Māori engagement with Christianity. Another work, Tuia (2003, Fig. 4), includes biblical text mostly in Māori, such as ‘Kenehi’ (Genesis), and ‘Ko Mikaere’ (Michael), along with ‘Papa,’ ‘Huri’ and ‘Hia’ spaced out in the bottom left corner. Furthermore, the literal translation

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54 Elsmore, Mana From Heaven, 22.  
55 Ibid., 23.  
56 O’Malley, The Meeting Place, 174.  
57 Ibid., 174-5.  
59 Ibid.  
60 Ibid.
of the prophet’s name in English (‘the Earth turns over’) is written out in this area, underneath the word ‘Satan’ and beside a representation of him.

A later painting, *Nahash* (2005), is one of the series that is dominated by the colour blue and is therefore related to Christianity and bispirtuality through the translation of firmament into ‘kikorangi’ as already discussed. Cotton further explores translation through the title of the work that is written out in a serif type font along the bottom of the painting: ‘Nahash,’ which recalls how Papahurihia summoned Te Nākahi, an atua whose name was derived from this Hebrew word for serpent. As mentioned in Chapter One, the 2007-9 painting *I Will Look Over Here. You Look Over There.* (Fig. 15) also references the Papahurihia movement through the inclusion of the serpent image from an 1855 drawing. Although it is not clear whether this drawing is specifically portraying Te Nākahi or some other serpent or dragon figure, Cotton’s inclusion of it in his painting is bound to draw a parallel to the nākahi of the Papahurihia movement. A more recent work, *Te Atua Wera* of 2012 (Fig. 25), features manaia figures and designs in red and white, painted over the black base that coats the entire surface of the wooden baseball bat. The handle is ringed in stripes of green, red and purple, over which ‘Te Atua Wera’ is painted in white capital letters, recalling the fiery god of the Papahurihia faith.

In a similar way to the Māori folk artists who appropriated Pākehā imagery in East Coast wharenui during the 19th century, it has been argued that Papahurihia and the northern Blackout Movement “did not so much occupy a hyphenated space between cultures as appropriate aspects of imported Western culture for Māori tradition, incorporating outside influences into customary practice, on tribal terms.” This is due to the fact that the movement only incorporated some aspects of Christianity and only those that did not contradict their original beliefs. It was intentionally anti-missionary and negated many of the Englishmen’s teachings of the scriptures, preferring their own uniquely Māori interpretations. In this way, Māori beliefs were still dominant, at least within the context of the Māori-led syncretic faiths.

Outside of this context however, Western attitudes towards faith and morality were beginning to oppress many aspects of the Māori way of life, including visual art practices. Northern whakairo traditions were being labelled lewd and blasphemous in

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64 Ibid., 29.
their depiction of ancestral spirits in a sinuous style that recalled the prevalence of local eels, but which the missionaries saw as reminiscent of the deceitful serpent from Genesis, and even described as Satanic.⁶⁵

As was discussed in Chapter One, the impact of Christianity on the visual tradition of the North is reflected in Cotton’s work as an expression of place, but he also references other aspects of this unbalanced bispirituality. An example of this is Portraits Without a Gold Finch of 2002 (Fig. 2), which consists of a field of evenly spaced, two-tone green circles against a solid black background. Within a cell-like form of orange ochre ringed in white that is placed in the centre of the painting is a representation of a carved figure holding a baby. The original carving that this depicts was made by an unknown carver around the year 1845 for a Catholic Church then being erected in the Bay of Plenty, and is a portrayal of the Madonna and Child.⁶⁶ The church rejected the carving as unsuitable due to “the Māori carving idiom, which European churchgoers might find objectionable.”⁶⁷ Despite this rejection, it remains a stunning example of a uniquely Māori depiction of Christian figures, illustrating the cross-cultural ideas that were being integrated into Te Ao Māori at this time.

Cotton titled this work ‘Portraits Without a Gold Finch’ in reference to this new and different way of portraying the Madonna and Child, with Māori rather than Western symbolism. The goldfinch was commonly included in European paintings of the Madonna and Child as it was associated with the Passion and Christ’s Crown of Thorns due to the thistle seed that it feeds on.⁶⁸ This, along with the red colouring on its head, caused it to be identified as “one of the small birds that tried to extract the thorns from the brow of Christ and became stained by His blood.”⁶⁹ The appearance of the goldfinch in the context of the Madonna and Child represented the foreknowledge that Jesus and Mary had of the Crucifixion.⁷⁰ Instead of a goldfinch, Cotton includes a fantail in a similar cell-like form at the bottom of the painting, perhaps evoking Māori narratives of the native pīwaiwaka rather than European narratives of the foreign goldfinch, much in the same way that the original carver utilised Māori rather than Pākehā symbolism.

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⁶⁷ Ibid., 197.
⁶⁹ Ibid.
⁷⁰ Ibid.
The historic rejection of the pictured carving reflects the widespread Western attitudes of negativity towards Māori whakairo that was perceived as not fitting their standards of morality, modesty and piety.\textsuperscript{71} The missionaries and other Europeans also enforced many other aspects of their moral system in an attempt to ‘civilise’ and assimilate Māori. They refused baptisms until the converts had denounced traditional practices such as polygamy, tā moko, customary funeral rites, tohunga practices, and cannibalism.\textsuperscript{72} Cotton has long explored these Western moral impositions in his work along with the effects of the written word (kupu) on the Māori visual art tradition. One painting that combines these concerns is \textit{After NZ – the second version} of 2005 (Fig. 9). The entire surface of this painting is covered in text in a Gothic font, painted in shades of grey or red against a black background. Small blue images of birds, targets and upoko tuhituhi are painted behind or on top of this text, but they are not highly detailed and are largely subsumed by the writing, relating to how the word began to supersede image in Māori art-making throughout Aotearoa.\textsuperscript{73} The majority of the text is murky, devoid of spaces between words, highly ornamental and largely incomprehensible. There are two words that stand out amongst the surrounding obscurity as relatively easy to make out: ‘History’ and ‘Cannibal’. These words suggest that history is obscured by writing, communicating increasing layers of meanings that are ever more removed from the original context through time. Understandings of Aotearoa New Zealand’s past, including aspects such as cannibalism, are distorted through non-indigenous accounts, descriptions and moralistic analyses.

\textbf{Language and text}

The use of text to explore notions of bicultural interaction is another major characteristic of Cotton’s art practice. He utilises both Māori and English script extensively in his paintings, expressing his bilingualism as a central form of biculturalism. Many writers have attributed his frequent inclusion of biblical text to the influence of

\textsuperscript{72} O’Malley, \textit{The Meeting Place}, 175.
Colin McCahon, but others have noted the already long tradition of painted text in
Aotearoa New Zealand prior to McCahon’s career. Cotton has himself explained that:

Text in painting has a long and established history in New Zealand art beginning from the
earliest introductions of printed Christian text translated into Maori in 1827 which had a
direct bearing on Maori art – painting and carving – in 19th century meeting houses…
More recent contemporary paintings by McCahon, Hotere and Muru, show text as image
is deeply rooted in the traditions of NZ art. My interest and reason for painting text is due
in part to this history because it is reflective of New Zealand’s bi-cultural past and
future.

This clarifies the multiple influences on Cotton’s use of text and also how it functions as
an expression of biculturalism in his work. A difference between the painted text in works
by McCahon and Cotton is that McCahon intended his text to be read literally, whereas
Cotton prefers to use words like images. There may be key words such as ‘History’ and
‘Cannibal’ in After NZ – the second version, but Cotton largely means for the words to
“operate like the birds or the clouds but at moments you can make out a word…I’m
alluding to the possibilities of something else instead of demanding a literal reading.”

The deliberate obscurity of most of the text in After NZ – the second version and
in many other paintings denies a literal reading and instead draws attention to the very
concept of writing itself. It recalls the introduction of this concept to Māori, its initial
 unintelligibility to them and the later impact it would have on their own culture.

McDonald explains that by focussing on the appearance of words and “drawing attention
to the act of writing, Cotton comments on the teaching of language – how English was
taught at the expense of the Maori language and culture, the most insidious of imperialist
drives.” A specific result of the suppression of the Māori language was the loss of much
of the oral tradition, replaced by written language: a phenomenon that is also expressed in
Cotton’s paintings, particularly in those of 2010 which feature freely hand-written text.

As McDonald so perceptively notes, “the fragmented of the texts – like remembered
phrases from long ago – reflects a shattered history…how European settlers imposed an
education system which ignored the Maori language and effectively denied Maori people
access to their own past.”

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76 Shane Cotton interviewed in Paton, “Shane Cotton: Stamina, Surprise and Suspense.”
77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
80 Ewen McDonald, Shane Cotton (Sydney: Mori Gallery, 1999), unpaginated.
81 Ibid.
This is yet another aspect of the oppressive biculturalism of Aotearoa New Zealand that is commonly subverted by Cotton. Since he began learning Te Reo Māori himself in the 1990s, both Māori and English have featured in his paintings and their titles. Works such as Smashing Myths (2010, Fig. 20) illustrate this bilingualism, with biblical text written primarily in Māori but with a small amount in English, using red airbrushed paint to hang the words in the cloudy skyscape. The loose, freehand script “mimics the rise and fall of a singing voice,” and as McDonald goes on to note, this visual and aural polyphony “dramatises the power of words and reasserts the importance of the oral tradition…”

Cotton’s reassertion of Te Reo Māori is often interpreted as an intentional obscuring technique rather than a reclaiming of a linguistic tradition, regarded in the same manner as his frequent crossing out or blurring of lettering. It is often assumed that the audience is unable to read Māori in the same way that they are unable to read the illegible suggestions of text. For example, McDonald writes that the use of Māori forces the viewer to “listen to the sounds of an unknown tongue,” and describes Māori text as “foreign words.”

This illustrates the dominance of the English language in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand, despite claiming to be a bicultural country with both English and Māori as official languages. English is still regarded as the default language, whereas Māori is often assumed to be unintelligible even within the context of the land where it developed into its unique form. Cotton confronts this inequitable reality with his prevalent use of Te Reo Māori, because “when language is content, there is always the desire to understand what is being said.”

McDonald claims that:

Cotton deliberately exploits this fascination: if you could speak Maori, if Maori language had been taught and not suppressed by the Pakeha desire for assimilation, then perhaps the socio-political situation would not be fractured as it is in New Zealand today.

This seems a likely intention of Cotton’s use of Te Reo, but it again ignores the fact that many Māori speakers would also view these paintings – not a large proportion of the audience perhaps, but certainly not zero either. To those that can speak Māori, the use of the language in Cotton’s paintings would function much differently, as a welcome invitation and avenue of connection rather than a confrontation. The many examples of

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81 Ewen McDonald, Shane Cotton (Sydney: Mori Gallery, 1999), unpaginated.
82 Ibid.
83 Along with New Zealand sign language.
84 Ewen McDonald, Shane Cotton (Sydney: Mori Gallery, 1999), unpaginated.
bilingual or verbal/visual wordplay in his works would be understood and appreciated for their wit rather than as exclusive subtleties. Examples of these include ‘Pou e rua’ (meaning both 'two posts' and the place in Northland, accompanied by two upright rectangular forms) in *Pouerua* (2003, Fig. 3); ‘Papa,’ ‘Huri,’ and ‘Hia’ (referring to the prophet and also meaning ‘the Earth turns over,’ which is also written out) in *Tuia* (2003, Fig. 4); ‘Kiko’ and ‘rangi’ (relating to the colour blue, flesh, and firmament or sky) in *Broken Water* (2003, Fig. 5); and ‘Kia ora mate’ written around an upoko tuhituhi, (where ‘mate’ could be the colloquial New Zealand term of endearment or the Māori word for death, in contrast to ‘ora’ which means life and health) in *The Spiral Reformation of the Body* (2002).

**Bicultural receptions**

Many writers do not seem to consider the possibility of Māori engagement with these paintings at all, perhaps due to the largely Western nature of the fine art establishment in which Cotton’s art is situated. Here European culture is still often perceived as the default or centre, and any indigenous expression is a departure from this and exists on the periphery. This can be recognised in comments such as the following, by Christina Barton:

> Some have been at pains to go back through Cotton’s imagery to the places and people from which they emanated, deciphering symbols, identifying motifs, to assign him a place within continuous Māori traditions.\(^8^5\)

It is not clear why the writers referred to here must necessarily have been ‘at pains’ to assign him this place within Māori traditions, as for some critics it is entirely normal and natural to do so. Here it is assumed that recognising the Māori symbols and motifs in Cotton’s work can only be done with much difficulty, which is likely the case for the majority of viewers but again, certainly not all.

Another example of this ‘othering’ of Māori knowledge and audiences is the Finnish curator Marketta Seppala’s comments that are quoted in Strongman, where Seppala claims that Cotton’s work has “moved from a position of transparency to one of opaque inaccessibility,” and “as in much Aboriginal art we are able to respond to the sheer beauty of the work but the content and meaning of the work is increasingly denied

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to us.” The ‘us’ used here again assumes that the audience is entirely non-indigenous, while the entire comment displays a sense of entitlement towards the work, as though it is a shame when indigenous artists express their own culture without making it immediately accessible to Western viewers.

Rather than seeing Cotton’s subversion of dominant cultural dynamics as a snub of non-Māori viewers that subtracts from the meaning of the work, John Huria claims instead that it adds richness to the meaning, even when viewers do not understand the language or other cultural references. He writes that these references “engender a similar effect to reading cross-cultural literature, where cultural distance and unintentional miscomprehension do not necessarily preclude a valid engagement with the text.” Indeed, many Pākehā viewers simply appreciate the works within their own cultural context, finding meanings that fit with their worldviews and knowledge systems.

Even when “barriers to intelligibility” are intentionally raised for the less informed viewer, Huria posits that the work itself that is done by the viewer in their desire to understand, then becomes part of the work’s meaning:

> It is not as if the author could have made things easier but refused. Making things easy would have denied the reader the experience needed to come to an understanding of the culture.

This relates back to Cotton’s works as experiences to be inhabited through time as discussed in Chapter Two. The specific form of this experience as one where the outside viewer must do work to understand cultural references is plausible in many of the paintings that Cotton completed early on in the decade and in the period prior to this, but becomes less so as explicit references to particular Māori narratives and concepts become less and less common from 2003 onwards.

Increasingly, the text in his paintings becomes inscrutable for all audiences, such as the lettering in *After NZ – the second version* and the deliberate obscuration of words in 2010 paintings like *Hole in the Rock* (Fig. 18) and *Smashing Myths* (Fig. 20). The incoherency in these paintings is experienced regardless of language ability and therefore has more to do with the negation of meaning and narrative than any strengthening of these through the experience of working to understand.

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88 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
The diptychs of the ‘Shane Cotton: Survey 1993-2003’ exhibition mark a major change in this respect, with the move away from prescriptive narrative and toward more ambiguous content. Jim and Mary Barr described the imagery of these paintings as “more complicated and obscure. The images tend to be arranged on the canvas without obvious narrative relationship to one another, fixed in empty space.” This leads to a more open field of potential interpretations, where meanings found by different viewers can vary widely depending on their own personal associations. One result of this is that biculturalism is seen both in the paintings themselves and in the audience’s reactions to them.

This biculturalism in reception is exemplified most clearly by two essays that were included in the catalogue that accompanied the survey exhibition of 2003: the first by Jim and Mary Barr titled “An Argument for Imagery,” and the second by John Huria titled “Metamorphic Vocabulary: Text and Image in Shane Cotton’s Paintings.” Both essays discuss the R.A. / U.K. (2003, Fig. 6) painting, describing it in very different ways according to what the viewers themselves bring to the work. The Barrs are Pākehā and Huria is Māori, and their cultural backgrounds are clearly reflected in their respective responses to Cotton’s painting.

For instance, the Barrs note that one upoko tuhituhi is “filled with striations of colour. A painted headland perhaps?” For them, the layers of colour here recall geological layering of earth. The same image holds much different associations for Huria, who is reminded of Uenuku Kuare. He writes that “the initials at the base of the painting, U.K., point to this Ngāpuhi rangatira (chief), as does the rainbow-like composition of the head: Uenuku is a rainbow…” This shows that the layers of colour remind him of a rainbow rather than layers of earth, and his associations are accordingly much different. While the Barr’s note that the three-dimensional fantail stands out against the flatness of the target shape, leading them to question “whether they exist in the same or divergent realities,” Huria sees a pīwaiwaka placed at the crown of the head. He

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91 Ibid., 109.
92 Ibid., 110.
93 Ibid.
95 Barr and Barr, “An Argument for Imagery.” 111.
recalls that “the head is the most tapu (sacred) part of the body, and the bird’s feathers seem to underscore this.”

Almost every other element of this painting that is mentioned by the writers is described in such differing ways, providing a clear insight into how Cotton’s works not only deal with biculturalism in their content, but also how they instigate bicultural reactions from audiences. In these works of 2003 and in those that follow, all such interpretations are equally valid. As the Barrs found, “there is no right order in which to approach these images,” and “every new viewing is an opportunity to make a different journey.” This new freedom from singular narrative will be explored further in the final chapter.

To conclude, this chapter has explored the central theme of biculturalism in Shane Cotton’s paintings. His symbols were shown to hold different meaning to both Māori and Pākehā and often represented the merging of the two cultures. The most prevalent references to this cultural hybridity were found to represent the unique synthesis of Māori and Pākehā belief systems that Cotton terms bispirituality. It was shown that these representations often came in the form of text, reflecting the close relationship between the spread of literacy and Christianity in history. This led to an exploration of bilingualism and the function of cultural incoherency in Cotton’s paintings. Each element of bicultural symbolism, bispirituality, and bilingualism was shown to explore both the unbalanced nature of biculturalism in Aotearoa New Zealand both historically and today, and to actively subvert this by privileging the Māori standpoint.

96 Huria, “Metamorphic Vocabulary.” 130.
97 Barr and Barr, “An Argument for Imagery.” 111.
IV
Shane Cotton and the Postmodern

Statement

We know that a picture is but a space
in which a variety of images, none of them original, blend and clash.
A picture is a tissue of quotations
drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.
The viewer is the tablet
on which all the quotations that make up a painting
are inscribed without any of them being lost.
A painting’s meaning lies not in its origin,
but in its destination.

- Sherrie Levine

The incoherency discussed in the previous chapter relates to the negation of a singular narrative and meaning that became increasingly apparent in Cotton’s work during the last decade. The ambiguity of place, time and cultural content draws a parallel between his practice and postmodernism, a movement that questioned knowledge and broke down narrative logic. This has led Cotton’s paintings to be described as “some of the first truly mature works of the postmodern period in New Zealand.”

This chapter will situate his work within the context of postmodernism. Firstly, the shift away from one clear narrative in his work will be explored, along with how this privileges the interpretations of viewers over the intention of the author. These interpretations will then be shown to result in a multiplicity of possible meanings of the works, dependent on the various backgrounds and predilections of the viewers. The postmodern distrust of authorial creation and originality is also made manifest in Cotton’s practice of appropriation, which will be examined in depth. This appropriation is related to the decontextualisation of imagery that is common in popular culture, postmodernist art and also surrealism. The elements of surrealism and allegory in Cotton’s work will also be discussed in this chapter as both are related to open interpretation and multiplicity of

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meaning as opposed to singular narrative. It is this openness that marks Cotton as a postmodernist painter of symbols and signs.

End of narrative

Cotton’s paintings of the 1990s and early 2000s were regularly based on a set of particular narratives, which could be readily identified. Whether it was a narrative of colonial history dealing with loss of Māori land and disenfranchisement, or of narratives relating to Cotton’s identity as a member of Ngāti Rangi, these works used symbols, signs and words to convey the narrative. Jim and Mary Barr described how they could be read “as a personal commentary on land, ownership and other historical issues. Dates, clearly definable artefacts, horizons and written texts combined to deliver readable stories. Certainly these narratives often required specialist knowledge, but [the paintings] … clearly had a tale to tell.”

A turning point came in 2003 with a shift away from prescriptive narrative and singular meaning determined by the artist. The paintings of that year were presented in a diptych format as a “challenge to narrative composition,” as Cotton experimented with combining the panels, some of which were worked on together and linked pictorially while others were combined after their independent completion. Tuia, Broken Water, and Kikorangi (all 2003) are all clearly unified across each of their two canvases, but Aria, White Tail, Pouerua, and R.A.-U.K. each consist of two largely distinct halves, with perhaps a small line of text added on last to bridge the gap and unite them. As the Barrs note, “Combining two independently developed canvases further undermines the expectations of story-telling.” This is because the element of chance weakens the idea of a predetermined narrative that shaped the work, and therefore indicates a lessening of the artist’s hold over the designation of meaning.

The composition of these works within the diptych format was also “more intuitive and less formally planned than earlier paintings,” leading to lack of clear narrative and less prescriptive meaning. The movement away from logical relationships between symbols in the expression of a singular narrative changed the way the paintings

6 Ibid., 110.
7 Ibid.
8 Barr and Barr, “An Argument For Imagery.” 110.
were received, where “the looser composition of the new works allows us to more readily drift into free association rather than engage in rational debate.” The seemingly random combination of images invited viewers to determine their own connections between them, free from clear authorial intentions. This lack of overarching narrative is a central feature of postmodernist theory, which is highly sceptical of metanarratives in particular.

From 2003 onwards, Cotton continued to break down singular narrative in his works but the effects are seen most clearly in the paintings from 2007-2012, where his symbolism is at its most ambiguous. As Justin Paton writes about *Takarangi* (2007, Fig. 12):

the painting is powerful precisely because it keeps its secrets, holds things back, refuses to be rushed towards an interpretation. We’re a long way here from Cotton’s clue-laden paintings of the 1990s…What’s startling about Takarangi is how much of that symbolic baggage Cotton has left behind, how light he is travelling.

*Takarangi*, like all the paintings in the ‘Red Shift’ series of 2007, features birds flying and falling in an unlimited, deep cloudy space. The lack of specified place in these works, as discussed in Chapter One, also relates to the negation of narrative. Paton notes elsewhere that:

for much of his career Cotton has been known as an artist preoccupied by place: one who grounded Māori stories and imagery afresh in the tradition of New Zealand landscape. But… what Cotton wants today is to un-ground his images: to cast them out into a strange open space where we can observe them without rushing into judgement.

This supports the idea that specifying a particular place also specifies a narrative and gives a particular meaning to the images, while leaving place and time ambiguous is more compatible with a postmodern negation of authorial narrative.

The lack of clues guiding viewers towards a clearly intended meaning in these works has led many writers to comment on their obscurity and lack of resolution. The singular, ‘true’ meaning that is often expected simply is not there in these paintings and many others. No matter how hard one tries to deduce what each element means, a final conclusion always proves elusive because it does not exist. As Robert Leonard writes, “these images have meanings and connection we can research and elaborate further, but in doing so we only get mired deeper in the puzzle. Resolution is withheld.”

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9 Barr and Barr, “An Argument For Imagery.” 110.
that is searched for here is an authoritative, singular version of the painting’s overall meaning.

The word ‘authoritative’ and similarly ‘authorised’ are particularly appropriate in this context, as they describe a version of a text’s meaning that is often considered most important in Western discourse: that of the author. This privileging of the author’s perspective was famously subverted by postmodernism, which was anti-hierarchical and therefore did not give primacy to any one viewpoint over another, even that of the work’s maker. Sherri Irvin explains:

…the notion of the author came into question in the twentieth century with thinkers like Roland Barthes, who closes his obituary of the author with the suggestion that ‘the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.’ Michel Foucault agrees, arguing that the concept of the author is a tyrannical one that does little more than restrict the free thinking of readers.14

Here it is clear that the meaning intended by the author, and his or her own interpretation of their created work, is accorded no higher status than the interpretations of viewers who didn’t play a part in the work’s making.

Cotton advances this view by negating authorial prescriptive meaning in his own paintings. Paton notes: “there is no authorized version, no final translation that will settle the paintings’ meaning once and for all.”15 Cotton deflects such authorization of meaning in several different but related ways: through the use of ambiguity and the absence of a clear narrative; employing elements of chance in the making of his work, as this detracts from the notion of author as having total control over the outcome of the work and therefore its meaning; and the practice of appropriation that further breaks down ideas of originality and author’s ownership of imagery.

**Multiplicity of meanings**

The shift from prescriptive narrative determined by Cotton to meanings freely accorded to his work by viewers is also a shift from singular to multiple truths, as there is only one author but many viewers. The postmodern view where the author’s intended meaning is no more valid than anyone else’s interpretations means that all are equally legitimate and ‘true’. In this way, Cotton’s relinquishing of narrative control of his works

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15 Justin Paton, “In the Air: Shane Cotton’s recent paintings.” in *Shane Cotton: To and Fro* (London: Rossi & Rossi, 2010), 15.
leads to the ability of each painting to hold a limitless number of potential meanings. After this shift, his works often embody differing and even contradictory meanings simultaneously. This is brought about by the range of different backgrounds and associations that each viewer brings to the work. The notion of a multiplicity of meanings is related to the postmodernist idea that universal truth is impossible and, as Butler writes, “truth itself is always relative to the differing standpoints and predisposing intellectual frameworks of the judging subject.”16 These differing standpoints are often distinguishable along cultural lines, as demonstrated by the contrasted interpretations of R.A.-U.K. (2003) in the previous chapter.

The recognition of multiple meanings, each equally valid, is a feature of a particularly postcolonial aspect of postmodernism. This is because the postmodern distrust of narrative extends to negating the Western grand narratives (e.g. progressive history and an underlying unity of all knowledge) that were projected onto Oriental societies during colonialism.17 Such narratives proved exceedingly destructive to colonised peoples around the world, leading postcolonial theory to break down these narratives along with their hegemonic power. Paul Sheehan writes that in postmodernism, “the death of the grand narrative thus heralds the birth of the local narrative, with its emphasis on diversity and heterogeneity.”18 This shows that postmodern theory is compatible with the idea that both Māori and Pākehā understandings of Cotton’s work are equally valid.

The diversity of meanings amongst various cultures and especially the relationship between Māori and Pākehā viewpoints has long interested Cotton. His work often suggests the relativism of truth, particularly in the way “19th century Pakeha and Maori alike recognised and misrecognised what they saw through what they knew.”19 This example of knowledge being dependent on cultural frameworks reflects the postmodern idea that truth is not universal. The relativity of truth in this context reflects the scientific theories of relativity that interest Cotton, where the way light is perceived changes relative to the position of the viewer. He continues this interest of cultural relativity into the contemporary context. As Leonard explains:

In forging his images Cotton isn’t just illustrating how this happened in the past, he’s making it happen now. Our readings of his obscure images depend on our predilections.

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16 Butler, Postmodernism, 16.
17 Ibid., 13; 15.
18 Sheehan, “Postmodernism and Philosophy.” 29.
Cotton’s work isn’t pitched to an ideal reader grounded in this stuff, but to a diversity of partial readers trying to find their way in through what they know. It’s premised on the possibility of misrecognition, generative misreading.

The ‘misrecognition’ and ‘misreading’ mentioned here is not suggestive of actual mistakes in interpretation or falseness of attributed meanings, but rather simply a range of various recognitions and readings that occur when different people view the paintings. Leonard’s statement that the work is indeed premised on evoking these differing readings contradicts the notion that any could be ‘wrong’.

The way that Cotton subverts unequal cultural dynamics in favour of a more balanced biculturalism, as discussed in the previous chapter, is also related to this aspect of postmodernism. This is because he refrains from privileging the traditionally dominant Western viewpoint and instead embraces local narratives and a diversity of related ideas. Ngāhiraka Mason describes Cotton as a “postmodern Maori ‘merchant of ideas’. His art activates, intervenes upon and transforms Maori narratives, stimulating and challenging Western explanations of Maori.”

Western explanations are both stimulated and challenged in his work because he brings aspects of Māori culture into the Western fine art context, but denies a Western, conventionally singular viewpoint of the content with the non-specificity of his symbols and the inherent contradictions in his paintings. This correlates to the view in postcolonial theory where:

truth becomes a lived concept beyond and in resistance to the more detached scientific use of the term…It is the subjective indigenization of what has typically been conceived of as objective, whether that be time, history or space, that will challenge the notion of one monolithic knowledge.

It is this subjectivity that Cotton’s work invite, thereby challenging Western hegemonic narratives that marginalise Māori and other indigenous lived experiences.

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20 Leonard, ”Cultural Surrealist.” 8.
Allegory in art

Another aspect of this subjectivity that results in a multiplicity of meanings in Cotton’s paintings is his use of allegory. Allegory occurs when “one text is doubled by another,” or when a painting is viewed through the lens of a different work. Leonard notes: “Allegories are open to interpretation, typically sustaining contradictory levels of meaning.” An example of allegory in Cotton’s work is his use of upoko tuhituhi, taken from photographs of actual toi moko (preserved heads). As Craig Owens wrote in 1980, “allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery; the allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them. He lays claim to the culturally significant, poses as its interpreter. And in his hands the image becomes something other…” Likewise, Cotton does not invent his images of toi moko, rather he borrows them, often from photographs that have themselves already been reproduced. He has explained that most of the heads he uses “come out of the Major-General Horatio Robley collection of mokomōkai that he assembled in the late nineteenth, early twentieth century.” Major-General Robley wrote a book that features many photographs of the toi moko that were in his collection and those of overseas museums, titled Moko; or Maori Tattooing.

Owens notes that there is a strong connection between photography and allegory, and that is the “capacity to rescue from historical oblivion that which threatens to disappear.” It is clear that the practice of preserving toi moko was dying out at the time the photographs in Robley’s book were taken, and this, along with the general assumption that Māori as a people or culture were then dying out, furthers the idea that the photographs ‘rescued’ the practice from being forgotten about after its dissolution. Cotton has expressed this sentiment himself:

…mostly the heads that I’ve used have had some kind of connection to Robley and I think that’s because there is a very famous picture of him sitting in front of his collection. It’s a really odd picture, but my position is that in a way what he did was good because it kept a kind of record.

25 Ibid., 7.
29 Shane Cotton interviewed in Paton, “Shane Cotton: Stamina, Surprise and Suspense.”
The relationship between the original photographer and Cotton is that he also wants to prevent the heads from falling into the oblivion of non-remembrance. He represents them in the contemporary context and brings them back into present consciousness. In this way, his frequent incorporation of these pictures in his work continues the desire of the original photographer to “fix the transitory, the ephemeral, in a stable and stabilizing image.”

But although Cotton appropriates these images and brings them into the present, he often manipulates them significantly, changing their appearance and also frequently obscuring them. An example of this is Broken Water of 2003 (Fig. 5). Here the image of a toi moko (taken from page 193 of Robley’s Moko book), has been placed in the middle of a black field. It is rendered in two tones of blue, making up a camouflage pattern across the entire surface of the head. This decontextualizes the image, flattens it out, and removes all detail of the moko that was visible in the original photograph. All this changes the image drastically, evoking new associations and meanings. As Cotton explained at the time of making this painting:

I’m not displaying them…I don’t see them as mokomokai anymore – I see them as images that…have their origins from that point but have been transformed into something else.

This transformation leads to the images functioning in a new and different way, with new connotations and potential readings.

Cotton’s practice of painting the upoko tuhituhi floating in empty space continued throughout the decade, with another example seen in Tradition, History and Incidents of 2007-9 (Fig. 16). The title here is the name of the tenth chapter of Moko; or Maori Tattooing and the same words are included in the painting, although ‘Incidents’ is mostly covered over by a branch of leaves. Over 30 upoko tuhituhi based on the photographs of toi moko from this chapter of the book are repainted all over the canvas, with Cotton’s characteristic cloudy skyscape behind. Some of these are smaller than others, giving a sense that they hover at different depths. They are all painted in black and blue with the lines of their moko and exposed teeth still visible. Scattered around them are fragments of red leaves and birds either in flight or being pulled in odd directions.

31 Horatio Gordon Robley, Moko, or, Māori Tattooing (Papakura: Southern Reprints, 1987), 193.
33 Robley, Moko, or, Māori Tattooing, 131.
Although the upoko tuhituhi here are more detailed that that of Broken Water, this strange environment serves to decontextualise them in a similar way.

The manipulation and decontextualisation of these images work, as Owens notes, to “empty them of their resonance, their significance, their authoritative claim to meaning.” In doing so, Cotton opens them up to a multitude of new possible meanings. Some viewers may see them in terms of the original toi moko themselves while others may read them as something entirely new and different. In this way, the upoko tuhituhi function as allegorical images that are open to multiple and even contradictory interpretations.

This element of contradiction in reception is consistent with the way Cotton makes his images, as he explains:

On the one hand I try to keep it looking like the original; on the other hand I’m trying to impose a sense of change in the work. What happens in this process is that they transcend the original. There is a moment when you have a sense of life or difference. The allegorical giving of new life to old images and the subsequent limitless new meanings again links Cotton to postmodernism, where the notion of one true narrative of history is undermined.

Another aspect of allegory in Cotton’s work is his combination of a wide range of mediums and stylistic categories, including text and image. Owens describes the “reciprocity which allegory proposes between the visual and the verbal,” where “words are often treated as purely visual phenomena, while visual images are offered as script to be deciphered.” This relates to Cotton’s regular treatment of words as non-literal images, such as in After NZ – the second version (2005, Fig. 9), where they are largely impossible to read, and in 2010 paintings such as Smashing Myths (Fig. 20), in which the words hang in the sky in a very physical, smoke-like manner. Conversely, his word-play with images reflects the “essentially pictogrammatical nature of the allegorical work. In allegory, the image is a hieroglyph; an allegory is a rebus – writing composed of concrete images.” This recalls the two posts in Pouerua that spelled out the word with pictures of its literal meaning (pou e rua: two posts), and the upoko tuhituhi in Broken Water with its blue flesh that relates to kikorangi, the flesh of the sky, blue, and firmament.

38 Ibid.
Owens goes on to elucidate further characteristics of allegorical and postmodern art:

This confusion of the verbal and the visual is however but one aspect of allegory’s hopeless confusion of all aesthetic mediums and stylistic categories…The allegorical work is synthetic; it crosses aesthetic boundaries. This confusion of genre, anticipated by Duchamp, reappears in hybridization, in eclectic works which ostentatiously combine previously distinct art mediums.  

Cotton’s hybridization of mediums is paradoxically carried out within the one medium of painting. He appropriates images from a wide range of categories, such as carving, photography, film, religious and commercial objects, digital imagery, sculpture, as well as painting. However, these diverse sources are united within his painting, largely on a flat surface. The confusion of genre mentioned by Owens is therefore only superficial in Cotton’s case, because despite utilising visual imagery from both art and non-art sources, Cotton’s works are unambiguously paintings of the fine art genre. His recent paintings on baseball bats are the exceptions here, as they blur the line between non-art object and work of art due to the use of a mass-produced readymade object. This reflects the confusion of genre anticipated by Duchamp that Owens mentioned, and also displays a postmodernist, anti-hierarchical attitude in the use of an item that is both symbolic of popular culture and undermines the author as sole creator of the work of art.

Appropriation of imagery

The appropriation and decontextualisation of imagery from many different categories is also related to the postmodernist fragmentation of meaning that breaks down the notion of unified knowledge. In this respect, Cotton has been likened to Richard Killeen, who also “preferred to undermine the authority behind signs.”  

Leonard describes Killen as a “textbook ‘death of the author’ postmodernist,” and the cutouts that he is renowned for as:

Paintings that are collections of image-fragments that lack an overarching rationale, a common thread, and are available for physical and conceptual reordering. The cutouts countered…traditional narrative pictures…

Cotton’s 2008 painting Coloured Dirt (Fig. 14) most strongly recalls Killeen’s cutouts as a collection of images without an overarching rationale. Flattened representations of blue upoko tuhituhi along with rock fragments and birds in red or green appear to be stuck on

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to the white canvas. One of the red birds has been replicated almost exactly, and the upoko tuhituhi have evidently been stretched in Photoshop.\textsuperscript{41} This clear manipulation and distortion of the images serves to disconnect them from the originals, severing conventional ties to context and meaning. The flatness of these distorted pictures along with the plain background devoid of clouds or depth, heightens the sense that these are nothing more than pure images stuck randomly together. Cotton described his fragmented images as:

\begin{quote}
a kind of unravelling of shards of matter or information…In the past I’ve tried to capture or allude to the entirety of a particular story, as in the bird myth for example. Here the works…are presenting the idea of piece, or fragments of information and partial truths.\textsuperscript{42}
\end{quote}
This illustrates his shift away from works based on singular narrative towards those where narrative is broken down into fragments that can hold multiple interpretations or truths. Here, images are emptied of their original significance and dispersed in “provisional arrangements that beg the viewer to connect-the-dots, to accord them meaning.”\textsuperscript{43}

The multiplicity of meanings inherent in each of his paintings is closely related to Cotton’s practice of appropriation, as the repeated borrowing of imagery results in an inability to attribute their creation and meaning to any one source. This leads to paintings in which each symbol and motif itself has layers of meanings and associations, and their combination results in a further array of possible connections and significations.

Appropriation from an exceptionally wide range of sources has been a central feature of Cotton’s artistic practice since the beginning of his career. He has described himself as “a bit of a magpie, flying around pinching stuff.”\textsuperscript{44} Such indiscriminate borrowing is characteristic of postmodernist art because it is, as Butler explains, “often simply unconcerned by the relationship between the formerly ‘high’ and ‘low’ genres…An alliance with popular culture is seen as anti-elitist, anti-hierarchical, and dissenting.”\textsuperscript{45} This alliance with popular culture is immediately apparent in Cotton’s regular references to movies, common slang sayings, and digital media, but also in the practice of reproducing images itself. Unashamed copying of imagery is itself an alliance with popular culture because of the characteristic ubiquity of image reproduction in popular culture today. From comics, magazines, advertisements and prints of artworks to

\begin{footnotes}
\item[44] Shane Cotton interviewed in Paton, “Shane Cotton: Stamina, Surprise and Suspense.”
\item[45] Butler, \textit{Postmodernism}, 64.
\end{footnotes}
digital copies of films and photographs, the endless reproduction of imagery is a major feature of contemporary popular culture. Incorporating this reality into his artwork through the use of appropriation therefore lessens the divide between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art.

This is also achieved through his recent use of mass-produced found objects: baseball bats. In 2011 and 2012, Cotton painted many identical wooden bats in his distinctive style, incorporating characteristic words and motifs from his visual vocabulary. An example from this series is *Te Atua Wera* of 2012 (Fig. 25), which features strips of colour encircling the bat along the length of the handle, creating contiguous circles that are reminiscent of the target motif. Cotton’s characteristic manaia figures are also present in white and red, while the title that is written in paint along the handle of the bat refers to the Papahurihia faith that was referenced in his works a decade earlier. *Te Atua Wera* and the other painted baseball bats bring sport, a major aspect of popular culture, into the fine art context.

Aside from the link to the mass production and reproduction of items and images in global popular culture, the practice of appropriation also connects Cotton to earlier Māori artists. His use of imagery from the Māori folk art paintings of Rongopai and the Madonna and Child carving makes this connection explicit, as the creators of these artworks were heavily influenced by the introduced art styles and conventions of the Europeans. But even Cotton’s appropriation of non-Māori images is a continuation of that older practice, as he is, like them, a Māori artist taking what images he sees from other cultures and choosing to put them into his own context. Helen Kedgley wrote in 2005:

> realising that Maori had been borrowing imagery from pakeha since the first moment of contact and that the boundaries between Maori and pakeha artistic expression had always been elastic, Cotton re-appropriates an early Walters painting...\(^{46}\)

In this case Kedgley is referring to a 1994 work titled *Picture Painting*, in which Cotton appropriated a flower motif from Gordon Walters, who had himself appropriated it from Mondrian.

These multiple layers of appropriation are common in Cotton’s work. A later example is seen in the image of Hongi Hika’s moko, which has four layers of removal from the represented person: from Hika himself, to his own carving of his head, to the photograph of that carving, to Cotton’s paintings that are based on the photograph (e.g. *Te Waiwhāriki, Play, The Hanging Sky*). Many other appropriated motifs in Cotton’s works illustrate a much further disconnection between them and what they signify. For example,

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the image of the Madonna and Child in *Portraits Without a Gold Finch* (2002, Fig. 2), which was discussed in the previous chapter, is taken from a photograph of the 1845 carving that was itself based on a European artwork. This would also have been one in a very long line of such portraits, each based on an earlier version, but even the earliest such image would still not have been a direct representation of the actual figures that are portrayed. In this way, the image in Cotton’s painting is so far removed from the signified characters of Jesus and Mary as to barely even symbolise them anymore.

Jean Baudrillard wrote extensively on this postmodern phenomenon of reproduced images that have no relation to any reality, referring to them as simulacra.\(^{47}\) He outlined four successive phases of the image in the contemporary context, with each phase progressively further removed from reality as follows:

- it is the reflection of a profound reality;
- it masks and denatures a profound reality;
- it masks the absence of a profound reality;
- it has no relation to any reality whatsoever;
- it is its own pure simulacrum.\(^{48}\)

The motif in *Portraits Without a Gold Finch* is an example of a pure simulacrum while the image of Hika’s moko illustrates a much lesser removal from reality.

Cotton further extends the distance between his signs and the reality they signify by repeatedly appropriating imagery from his own works.\(^{49}\) When motifs are recycled so regularly in his paintings, they became increasingly symbolic of Cotton and his art practice itself. For example, the female figure that is seen in *The Cloud Bookcase* (2010-12, Fig. 24) also featured in *Reach* (2012), *Back Words* (2011), *Baseland* (2011), *Easy Forever Easy* (2011) and *Mother Mother* (2010). This repetition creates an effect where the image becomes primarily a sign of Cotton’s art practice as a whole, and only subsequently denotes the many external layers of signification - as a representation of a photograph of a statuette of an ideal figure of the Virgin Mary.

*The Cloud Bookcase* is a prime example of this self-referential effect, as it showcases a myriad of Cotton’s most recognizable symbols from his entire career. Thick red lines divide the painting into boxes and shelves of various shapes and sizes, laid over the background of his distinctive smoky grey cloudscape. Some of Cotton’s motifs sit neatly on these shelves while others float in the spaces, as though the effects of gravity are

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\(^{48}\) Ibid., 6.

inconsistent. The wide range of symbols displayed on this ‘cloud bookcase’ include the plant pots that Cotton appropriated from Rongopai in the 1990s; landscape outlines from the same period; electric blue birds, rock fragments, and some small targets; upoko tuhituhi and skulls; the carved bust of Hongi Hika and the Māori Madonna and Child carving, which is rendered in the same black and white graphic style as the Virgin Mary figure that floats in another enclosed space.

These images are all placed as if on display, with little to no connection to each other besides having been a part of Cotton’s previous paintings. By emptying all these images of their external meanings in order for them to function as pure symbols of his own art practice, Cotton illustrates precisely Baudrillard’s concept of the reproduced image that bears no relation to any reality. In this way, Cotton’s continual self-quotation is distinctly postmodernist.

The influence of surrealism

Many parallels can also be drawn between the postmodernist aspects of Cotton’s art and surrealism, as surrealist art was also based on “rejection of the Western ideals of a single truth, universal order, and progress.” Sidra Stich, Anxious Visions: Surrealist Art (New York: Abbeville Press, 1990), 12. This negation of conventional metanarratives often led to a similar decontextualisation of images that denied logical interpretation and notions of true meanings in images. Like the later postmodernists, surrealist artists noted the disconnection between reality and its representations. An example of this is Magritte’s 1929 painting La Trahison des Images (The Treachery of Images), in which an image of a pipe is labelled ‘Ceci n’est pas une pipe’ (This is not a pipe) in reference to the falseness of images that only portray the real but are not real themselves. Cotton titled his 2011 exhibition ‘The Treachery of Images’ in homage to Magritte and the surrealists, and several elements of their ideas and art style can be readily identified in many of Cotton’s paintings. His decontextualisation of images within nonsensical or ‘surreal’ environments, and the deliberate emphasis on the falseness of symbols are examples of surrealism’s influence on his work.

In a similar vein to Magritte’s image of a pipe that is of course not a real pipe, Cotton’s images of upoko tuhituhi are emphasised as not being actual toi moko. The differing terminology in this case makes this absolutely clear: toi moko are physical

preserved heads while upoko tuhituhi are ‘drawn heads,’ or superficial representations of toi moko.\(^{51}\) As Cotton has stated in regards to his upoko tuhituhi:

> when I remade this image I didn’t take a position on it. I was interested in the image and the way it was captured and I just wanted to re-present it – to re-present the heads in a surreal unknown state and remove them from that original position.\(^{52}\)

This removal from the original position is another link to surrealism, as surrealist artists often portrayed objects in very unusual combinations and environments as a means to attack “traditional ways of seeing and thinking.”\(^{53}\)

Cotton’s works of the 2012 ‘Smoking Gun’ series feature his most distinctly surrealist scenes in this respect, as they largely consist of strange combinations of images on differing scales that are placed in a vague, dreamlike space. An example from the series is *Reach* (2012, Fig. 26), in which the now familiar statuette of Mary stands on a tall two-legged table. Next to this is a much larger and highly abstracted figurative image, which has been appropriated from a 1962 Paratene Matchitt painting titled *Whiti Te Ra*.\(^{54}\)

A low white block of paint that resembles a marble slab lies along the bottom edge in the right corner, while a similar rectangular form hangs inexplicably in the upper right corner, extending past the edge of the canvas. The background is a hazy grey field, dark at the top and fading even to a pale shade at the bottom, creating an unrealistic lighting effect and ambiguous space that could be in- or outdoors but is most likely neither.

Robert Leonard wrote in his essay on surrealism in Cotton’s art that:

> rather than ascribe specific narratives to Cotton’s paintings, it has been suggested that we give ourselves over to the kind of cultural uncanny that they generate. This idea frames the work as a kind of surrealism…\(^{55}\)

The cultural uncanny mentioned here is exemplified by *Reach* with its juxtaposition of two appropriated figures: one of Pākehā origin and the other from a Māori artist, but both entirely removed from any reality. Their mismatched scales, which make it difficult to imagine the true size of the objects, along with their placement in an ambiguous environment with other unclear forms, is heavily reminiscent of surrealist paintings.

The element of the uncanny seen in *Reach* has long featured in Cotton’s work, as has his emphasis on the falseness of images. John Hurrell noted that Cotton’s characteristic rock faces are at times not as solid as they may seem:

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\(^{51}\) Robert Jahnke suggested the term ‘upoko tuhituhi’ in 2003 to describe the particular painted heads of Cotton’s works, as explained in Strongman, “Ruarangi.” 31.

\(^{52}\) Shane Cotton interviewed in Paton, “Shane Cotton: Stamina, Surprise and Suspense.”


…that rock wall is also paper thin – an ersatz prop just as the free-falling birds are only feathery fleeces. Sometimes Cotton shows an archway cut in the granite and its edges pulled apart, to reveal the cliff as a mere painted sheet suspended in the void. Cotton is testing us here with his surprising twisting of his symbols, contemplating the falseness of the ostensibly physical world…

Here he describes Cotton’s paintings of 2010, and *Hole in the Rock* (Fig. 18) in particular. This is the work in which the rock face looks to have been digitally cut away, opening up a hole through which the cloudy background shows. The sharp edges of this cut-out resembles paper that has been sliced through with a knife rather than the rough texture of rock outlines, giving the entire cliff face the appearance of a thin painted sheet that is only an illusion of rocky solidity.

This deliberate falseness of Cotton’s scenes can also be detected in earlier works such as *Takarangi* (2007, Fig. 12). Although the rock wall here does appear to be more solid than that in *Hole in the Rock*, and the space appears much more naturalistic than in *Reach*, Cotton has revealed that the tangle of lines behind the birds are “like little manaia figures,” that serve to “frustrate the space a bit. And I sometimes do things like that because I want to remind the viewer that it ain’t all that real…” It is this tension between the familiar and the uncanny that links Cotton’s paintings to surrealism, in which such dreamlike scenes that mixed elements of reality with the impossible were common due to the surrealists’ celebration of the subconscious and illogical mind over rationality and order. Leonard described how surrealists are “less interested in decoding dreams, making sense of them, than reveling in their manifest non-sense, enjoying the leverage their poetic craziness offers over the prevailing common sense.”

In this way, Cotton’s paintings of dreamlike and nonsensical scenes are characteristic of both surrealism and postmodernism. Both movements share a distrust of rational narratives that are typically used to decode and make sense of the world, and this is made manifest in works where images are displaced from their conventional contexts and placed in illogical environments. This privileges subconscious irrationality and contradiction over order and common sense.

In conclusion, this chapter has situated Cotton’s art practice within the context of postmodernist theory, in which Western grand narratives of singular truth and historical

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57 Shane Cotton interviewed in Paton, “Shane Cotton: Stamina, Surprise and Suspense.”

58 Ibid.

progress are broken down in favour of a multiplicity of meanings. This was shown to relate to Cotton’s shift from works with a prescriptive authorial narrative to paintings where images are disconnected from their conventional contexts and associations in order to allow viewers to construct their own interpretations. Central elements of Cotton’s artistic practice, including incoherence, appropriation, and allegory were shown to break down the notion of one authoritative reading of his work by negating both narrative and the notion of the author as the sole creator of meaning.
Conclusion

This thesis has studied Shane Cotton’s paintings from 2000 to 2012 and identified four broad themes of place, time, biculturalism, and the postmodern within them. The postmodern distrust of singular, authorial meaning was found to be strongly reflected within each of the three previous themes, and therefore his art practice as a whole was broadly situated within postmodernist theory.

The first chapter found that subjective symbols of place were more prevalent than literal references, and all expressions of place receded as Cotton shifted away from expressions of his identity. This resulted in much greater ambiguity that opened up the works to universal viewers. The second chapter showed how Cotton unified elements of time within his work with symbols of past, present, and future that broke down the distinctions between the tenses. This resulted in paintings situated in ambiguous time that correlated with the ambiguity of space and broke down specific narrative.

In the third chapter, Cotton’s images were found to symbolize various concepts depending on which cultural lens they are viewed through, while other symbols related to bicultural synthesis. Biculturalism is also explored through Cotton’s dual use of language, and the text in his painting was shown to often result in deliberate incoherency in a further negation of prescriptive narrative.

These threads of ambiguity, synthesis and incoherency running through each theme all strengthen the postmodernist analysis of Cotton’s art, where a singular interpretation is negated in favour of multiple meanings as determined by viewers.

The subversion of unbalanced bicultural dynamics discussed in Chapter Two was also shown to relate to postcolonial aspects of postmodernism, where conventional hegemonic Western metanarratives are broken down in favour of diverse knowledges and experiences. This was reflected across all themes in Cotton’s art.

His symbols of place were found to privilege Māori connections to the land through local myth, art styles and traditional names. The works where these symbols were presented without the illusion of depth related to the Māori convention of aspective art, where ancestors are shown without being fixed in time or space. This lack of specified time, along with works where temporal tenses were combined, reflected the Māori cyclical view of time rather than the Western linear version.
In the third chapter, which focused on biculturalism specifically, references to historical people and events were shown to explore both cultural synthesis and the suppression of culture that occurred after the balance of power between Māori and Pākehā was destabilised. The aspect of bispirituality was singled out for closer inspection as it embodies these two elements of suppression and synthesis in Aotearoa New Zealand’s biculturalism. It was found that Cotton regularly references Māori syncretic faiths along with traditional practices that were suppressed by Christianity.

The postmodern emphasis on viewers’ free interpretation over authorial intention can also be seen throughout the previous themes. The ambiguity of place explored in Chapter One was found to correlate with Cotton’s expansion on the international art stage, allowing international viewers to freely interpret the works on their own terms. In the same respect, the combination of tenses discussed in Chapter Two allows viewers to situate the paintings in whichever time that seems most appropriate. Audiences’ experiences of viewing the works through time was also explored in this chapter due to the element of temporality in both the making and viewing of Cotton’s paintings.

Overall, it was found that Shane Cotton uses symbols, signs and text to explore broad themes of place, time and biculturalism in ways that allow the viewer to determine the meaning of each work for themselves. References to a specific place, time or cultural narrative are generally ambiguous and able to be read in many varying ways, while privileging the Māori viewpoint. Cotton’s regular inclusion of allegorical and appropriated imagery highlights the many layers of meaning in his imagery, while incoherency and elements of surrealism negate a singular prescriptive narrative. All these related features of his art practice leads to a description of Cotton as a postmodern, Māori, painter.
Figures

1. **Ruarangi** 2000
   Oil on canvas
   800 x 1600 m
2. Portraits Without a Gold Finch  2002
Acrylic on canvas
1400 x 1400 mm
3. Pouerua  2003  
Acrylic on two canvases  
1400 x 2800 mm
4. Tuia  2003
Acrylic on two canvases
1400 x 2800 mm
5. **Broken Water**  2003
Acrylic on two canvases
1400 x 2800 mm
Acrylic on two canvases
1400 x 2800 mm
7. Te Waiwhāriki  2004
Acrylic on canvas
1800 x 1600 mm
8. After NZ II  2005
Acrylic on canvas
350 x 410 mm
9. After NZ – the second version 2005
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
2000 x 3000 mm
10. **Play** 2006  
Acrylic on canvas  
1800 x 1500 mm
11. Red Shift  2006-7
Acrylic on linen
1900 x 3000 mm
12. Takarangi  2007  
Acrylic on linen  
1900 x 3000 mm
13. **Camp Fire** 2008
Acrylic on linen
1000 x 1000 mm
14. Coloured Dirt  2008
Acrylic on linen
1800 x 1800 mm
Acrylic on linen
1900 x 3000 mm
16. Tradition, History and Incidents  2007-9
Acrylic on linen
2650 x 2650 mm
17. Going To and Fro. Walking Up and Down In It. 2009
Acrylic on canvas
1000 x 1500 mm
18. Hole in the Rock  2010
Acrylic on canvas
1500 x 1000 mm
19. **Sons of God(s)**  2010
Acrylic on linen
1000 x 1500 mm
20. **Smashing Myths** 2010
Acrylic on canvas
1500 x 1000 mm
21. **Mother Mother** 2010  
Acrylic on linen  
1000 x 1500 mm
22. **Easy Forever Forever Easy** 2011
   Acrylic on linen
   2650 x 2650 mm
23. **Diamonds and Pearls**  2011
Acrylic paint on map
24. The Cloud Bookcase 2010-12
Acrylic on linen
2650 x 2650 mm
25. Te Atua Wera  2012
Acrylic on white ash
850 x 60 x 60 mm
26. Reach  2012
   Acrylic on canvas
   505 x 505 mm
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