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Kāinga Tahi, Kāinga Rua.
Ka Mate Kāinga Tahi, Ka Ora Kāinga Rua.
Kiinga Tahi, Kiinga Rua
Ka Mate Kiinga Tahi, Ka Ora Kiinga Rua.

When the first home falls a second will arise.

“Race is irrelevant, but all is race.” (Goldberg 1993)

My research and three subsequent exhibitions have focused on biculturalism. I examine European perceptions of Maori and the Pacific, Maori perceptions of European colonization, and also whether New Zealand’s position on biculturalism has impacted on its relationships with other Pacific nations.

In a post-colonial age it has become unfashionable to speak of binaries. Terms such as colonizer-colonized, dominator-dominated, self-other, white-black do not reflect our new existence in this post-colonial versus colonial age. Yet to indigenous peoples who have endured colonization its repercussions are ongoing, post-colonial does not necessarily mean post-domination, post-assimilation, and the binaries of the past serve as powerful truths.

My research has been in a sense born out of our nation’s past obsession with one such binary, indeed biculturalism itself. There has been much deliberation on the subject, especially since the sesqui-centennial celebrations of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1990. With the dramatic increase of immigrants and white backlash however, ‘multiculturalism’ has become the nation’s new focus. Biculturalism is seen by many as an elevation of one minority above others and the Treaty as a quaint relic of the past which does not acknowledge current demographics. Yet the foundation mythologies of the nation persist; insisting upon some sort of bicultural dichotomy, a marriage between two peoples enshrined in the Treaty and the Coat of Arms, where a tattooed warrior and sagacious blonde meet, marry and merge to create the new New Zealanders. To this end my research has been to revisit the original dichotomy, colonizer-colonized, European-Maori/Pacific Islander, the black and white of it all, and to examine Europe and its influence on the Pacific; the Pacific and its influence on Europe.

Consciousness of how European view Maori or Maori view European is the essence of biculturalism. Biculturalism has been largely a Maori preoccupation, explored by Maori artists as a means of reconciling their Western education or art school training with a Maori world view. European or Pākeha artists such as McCahon or Schoon have undoubtedly contributed to making Maori art forms more acceptable to a European audience by including Maori imagery in their work, although this has not been their primary concern. Such a ‘reconciliation’ has been a central theme in the painting and sculpture of many of the ‘founding fathers’ of what is now known as the ‘Contemporary Maori Art’ movement. Artists such as Arnold Wilson, who attended Elam from 1948, Para Matchitt, Cliff Whiting and Fred Graham, who trained as art specialists under Gordon Tovey in the 1950s, sought to express the belief systems, history and worldview of their people by the contemporary means and practices they had acquired at such institutions. Perhaps the first group exhibition that explored this duality was as early as 1958, where predictably, the work was compared to the traditional artefacts of the artists’ ancestors. The Auckland Star critic writes “…the show has crudities, but throughout are the strong lines and sweeping rhythms, the gusto and the naïveté, that stamped the workmanship of the exhibitors’ forebears”.[Maori fullback goes in for abstract painting’, Auckland Star 10/6/58]. In this and in the exhibitions that followed, the artists were criticised by Pākehā and Maori alike, on the one hand because the definition of Maori art was confined to traditional precedents only, and on the other, because Maori feared that deviation from the old art forms would lead to their eventual loss.
By 1976 after group exhibitions in Hamilton, Christchurch and abroad, and three years after
the establishment of the ‘Maori Artists and Writers Society’, Frank Davis was to write that Maori
artists were responding to the pressures of new social forces. These included: “the need to
retain links with the people and places and heritage…to retain Maori integrity; the need to
rework, extend and revitalise the stagnating imagery and symbolism of “official” Maori art”
and “the need to come to terms with the new materials and technology of the present time”
(Davis 1976). These artists were conscious of making their art relevant to a Maori community
that was becoming increasingly urbanised and assimilated into mainstream society.

Biculturalism for Maori became a necessity in order to adjust to urban life, and also a
practicality as, more often than not, Maori marriages were to Pākehā. In the words of
Ranginui Walker, “the differences from our colonial past are being settled in the bedrooms
of the nation” (Walker 2001). This inevitably created a new dynamic in the visual arts, as Selwyn
Muru was to observe, “...real power and originality comes more profoundly when the two
cultures meet (creating) images inspired and driven by the organic life force, mauri, of our
two cultures and heritages” (Muru 1995).

The present generation of Maori artists who emerged from this platform of bicultural art, of
whom I am a part, have been described as “largely urbanized, detribalized, and
westernised” (Mane-Wheoki 1995) and by lacking a depth of understanding of Maoritanga
possibly “about to light new fires of destruction” (Mead 1984). One of the crucial differences
between sculpture made by this generation is that the work may be conceptually but not
necessarily visually Maori. Formerly artists such as Cliff Whiting had made sculpture with
obvious references to the carving patterns and kowhaiwhai designs of traditional art,
although exploring new materials. One artist in particular however, Matt Pine, made sculpture
that could not easily be identified as Maori although a knowledge of the Maori worldview is
crucial to understanding the concepts underpinning his work. This has been the pathway for
the next generation of Maori artists, such as Michael Parekowhai and Peter Robinson. These
artists have broadened the debate on biculturalism, Parekowhai’s work ‘Kahukura’(1995) and
Robinson’s ‘Percentage Series’(1993) for example, both appropriate works by Gordon Walters
and by doing so reclaim the koru for Maori.

Ironically, as art with a bicultural focus has come to the fore of mainstream New
Zealand art, what constitutes biculturalism itself has become contested ground. Many non-Maori writers,
who have little experience of the Maori worldview have entered the debate and are
determining what it is to be bicultural, often to an international audience. Hence, with the
selection of Peter Robinson and Jacqueline Fraser for the first Venice Biennale in which New
Zealand participated, there exists a certain ambiguity. Much is made of the fact that the
artists are Maori, but the curators are at great pains to point out they are working in an
international arena. They are presented as being different and yet the same, referencing the
same artists and engaging in the same internationalist dialogue as the other artists in the
Biennale.

How can an indigenous artist engage in an internationalist art language and yet maintain a
unique cultural perspective, regardless of location? Biculturalism in New Zealand art has, as
discussed, largely been the domain of Maori artists absorbing Pākehā influences. Could a
Maori artist turn a bicultural gaze on Europe and reinterpret how Maori, or more broadly the
Pacific, has been perceived in the mind of its European colonizer? Would this influence an
understanding of how the colonial experience had been perceived by Maori? Lastly, did the
nation’s professed focus on biculturalism have an impact on its relationships towards other
peoples in the Pacific?

To answer these research questions I proposed three exhibitions, commencing in 2000. The
first, ‘Podes Antipodes’, was conceived, researched and presented in Europe after a six
month artist’s residency in Scuol, an alpine village in Switzerland. Here I researched the
question, how has the South Pacific and its peoples been perceived in the minds of its
European colonizers?
After residing in Europe I returned to New Zealand to contemplate the theme of my second exhibition ‘Moengaroa’ which is an investigation into the question, how has the European colonial experience been perceived by Maori? The third part of my research and resulting exhibition, entitled ‘Kāinga Tahi, Kāinga Rua’, illustrates a much more complex web of relationships. I examine the history of a Micronesian island called Ocean Island, or Banaba in the indigenous language, which was exploited by New Zealand and Australia for its phosphate resources. The colonisers are Europeans by race but not by birth, the labourers are not Banabans but other Pacific Islanders, the phosphate is used to revitalize the soils of another Pacific Island. Such a multiplicity goes beyond a binary reading, which enriches possibilities for any visual interpretation of such a history.

In 2000 I travelled to Switzerland to undertake an artist’s residency in the alpine village of Scuol. As a kind of Gauguin in reverse I took my preconceptions about Europe and Europeans with me. Gauguin’s journey to the South Seas had been just as much an excuse to unleash the ‘primitivist’ from within as discover the primitivism of his surroundings. What he consequently discovered was indeed less significant than what he sought, his primeval urge to ‘go native’ an excuse to relieve more sinister ambitions. “I saw plenty of calm-eyed women, I wanted them to be willing to be taken without a word, brutally” (Gauguin 1972). Colonial literature is riddled with such examples where the body of the ‘other’ is synonymous with the body of the land. Land is virginal, waiting to be possessed, to be penetrated. “How that alien body, is to be perceived, known, mastered or possessed is played out with a dynamic of knowledge/power relations which admits of no reciprocity” (Solomon-Godeau 2002). This has become a central theme in all three exhibitions.

Just as Gauguin had journeyed to the Pacific to reassert what he had always known, I was weary of doing likewise. Switzerland yielded much that was to be unexpected. Although in the heart of Europe, the nation prides itself on its neutrality, and unlike its neighbours has no history of colonial possessions. Three Swiss sons were to cast a long shadow over the South Seas both by their influence and in determining how the region and its inhabitants would be perceived in the European mind.

Johan Lavater was the father of the dubious science known as physiognomy, in which facial features were measured and recorded to determine character and intelligence. Used initially to distinguish criminals, anthropologists brought the ‘science, and their callipers into the Pacific. Tables upon tables exist to differentiate racial characteristics measuring nose heights and widths, the ‘zygo-frontal bigonial diameters’ and head widths of Pacific Islanders from Pukapuka to Pago Pago. Such an obsession with measurement and a methodical analysis of the natural world speaks more about a nation of train spotters and precision tool makers than their Polynesian subjects.

John Webber was the first Swiss to have direct contact with Pacific Islanders. As the official artist on Cook’s ‘Resolution’ he was responsible for keeping a visual record of the artefacts and people he encountered. Today his renderings have become invaluable resources for European and Pacific Islander alike. One of his drawings of a Hawaiian canoe, for example, records its crew wearing unusual helmets made from gourds. These have become an iconoclastic image for the Hawaiian Sovereignty Movement. Webber himself appears indifferent to the peoples he encountered, more eager to promote their lack of civilisation to elevate the achievements of Cook and his crew. He writes in a letter to a cousin: “We who had lived among savages during the period of four years...I say without exaggeration that this voyage holds the first rank among all that have taken place before...” (Webber 1781).

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, born in Geneva, never actually used the term ‘noble savage’. His plea to eighteenth century Europe to question a blind faith in progress and fledgling industrialisation advocated a return to the lifestyle of natural man. His writings do not exalt indigenous people as exemplary of this. Many of his ideas originate from first hand observation of the Swiss farming communities around him. While Switzerland was perceived as backward by the rest of Western Europe, which was steaming head on into the Industrial
Revolution, Rousseau was eager to promote his compatriots’ bucolic pastoral and alpine existence as a virtue, humanity living closer to nature. This in turn attracted the English Romantic poets to Switzerland, who were followed by an English middleclass making the Swiss Alps a popular tourist destination. Eventually, one such attraction, and directly linked to Rousseau’s influence in persuading Europeans to seek salvation in nature, was natural mineral baths. Natural cures were sought and promoted for a variety of complaints, health spas emerged promoting mountain mineral water miracles.

The Scuol-Nair Kulturzentrum where I conducted my artist’s residency had once been such a place. As a former bathhouse it had serviced a palatial hotel only meters away, catering for English tourists. Close by stood a mansion built in anticipation of a visit from Queen Victoria. I was quick to observe that the hotel had been built in the 1860s, the same time that my father’s tribal lands in New Zealand had been invaded. Land from Mangatāwhiri in the north to Maungatapu in the south had been confiscated, the Waikato tribe dispossessed by a Governor eager to satisfy English land lust. I felt that a direct connection could be made between the English invading our land and their compatriots, “invading” Switzerland to convalesce and recuperate from the grind of the new industrial age, essentially sustained by resources from the colonies. Regeneration required a bizarre cleansing/purification/baptismal right of “taking the waters”. By comparing the English bathhouse patrons to the European explorers and pioneers, Rousseau’s influence had come full circle. On the one hand English tourists had come to the Alps seeking purification in nature. On the other, explorers such as Bougainville and Vancouver had observed indigenous peoples through Rousseau’s ideology. Natural man, once observed, needed to be protected from the inevitability of ‘civilization’.

I found the bathhouse environment in Switzerland cold, clinical, sterile, clad in white tiles, almost asylum-like, and I sought to make work from a material that was the antithesis, the ‘antipodes’ of this. Coal is dirty and blackens all it touches. It references racial slurs yet is of the earth. I created an oversize bath from this material as a reversal of the purification rite. ‘baptism only backwards. Katerina Teaiwa had sent me some photographs of colonial administrators in Banaba towering over their native servants; white skin and white navy uniforms in stark contrast to the dark hue and apparel of their subordinates. In the white mind white is the colour of all virtue, cleanliness, godliness, purity. Black is the inverse of this, the colour of sin, moral corruption, sexual deviation. Coal and its associated racial slurs are symbolic of this condition. The coal bath reverses the cleansing rite to reveal one’s true colours, essentially rending on the outside what lies within. Apess, a Native American writing in 1883 compares black skin to the tattooing of white skin; “Now suppose the skins were put together, and each skin had its nation’s crimes written upon it—which skin do you think would have the greatest?”(Apess 1992) White skin tattooed black with such crimes inverses physical appearance and internal morality. He suggests, “Whites are black in their feelings towards others... Hypocrisy is a form of “blackness” and no one is blacker than the white man” (Michaelsen 1999).

Several exhibitions of Oceanic and African art seen in France and Switzerland seemed to confirm this “blackness”. The image of the South Seas savage and sexually available wahine frozen in time, eternally dwelling on the same anonymous and ‘primitive’ plain as Navaho rug weaver, Zuni, Kwakiutl or Aztec goldsmith still prevailed. Attitudes had not discernibly shifted since the “Magiciens De La Terre” exhibition in the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1989. An exhibition at Foundation Beyeler in Basel placed tribal objects alongside modernist paintings, in the manner of the ‘affinities’ section of the much debated ‘Primitivism in Twentieth Century Art’(MOMA 1984). The final show held at the Musée National des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie in Paris entitled “Vahines et Kannibals” sought to critique how the colonial museum had portrayed indigenous peoples in the Pacific but succeeded only in perpetuating the same: oversize images of cannibal feasts and semi-clad brown skin beauties prevailed, much to the embarrassment of anyone from the Pacific.
Upon my return to New Zealand I embarked on a second phase of research for an exhibition addressing the question, "How was the colonial experience and European colonial perceived by the indigenous people? The term ‘European’ at this time seemed itself problematic. Although used as a racial category in this country in preference to the native ‘Pākehā’, the national characteristics of Swiss, French or English appeared so markedly different 'European' seemed no longer adequate. Likewise in the United States ethnic groups as diverse as Celt or Mediterranean, Greek or Irish had ‘reracialized’ under the banner of ‘Whiteness’ or Caucasian (Jacobson 1998).

In the second exhibition entitled ‘Moengaroa’ I return to a veneration of the domestic object; objects that surround us, objects that define us. I presented nothing more than a pillow, a bed, and white sheet, composed of illuminated units that were made to look like soap. Each object anticipates a different solution to racial conflict in this land; replacement, genocide, assimilation. If the bed is a metaphor for the land, the white sheet becomes a shroud, where indigenous place names have been suffocated and new names are illuminated. Over twelve hundred names of geographical features, lakes, waterways and settlements fall with the purity of snowflakes, listed chronologically from Tasman’s Staete Landt in 1642 to names of the present day. Names given by Dutch, French, English, Italians, Austrians and Scandinavians, faithfully recorded on light boxes like a chapel memorial wall, it is ambiguous whether this is a homage to pioneers or cultural genocide. No Maori names are present and this is the point, they are being lost, absorbed, or reinvented, symptomatic of the assimilation process. In the first exhibition white became black, where external skin colour was transformed to reveal the true colour of the soul. In this exhibition the moral symbolism of black and white is ambiguous, where black does not necessarily mean sin, and white is not necessarily good. I play upon the paradox that light/white can be both positive and destructive. Black, which has negative connotations in western perception, can be the colour of mother earth, Papatuanuku, the muck from which all life grows.

This state of ambiguity, an absence of absolutes, was confirmed by my research on Banaba Island. A friend, Katerina Teaiwa had written a Doctorate on the island, now annexed to Kiribati, where a New Zealander, Albert Ellis, discovered phosphate in 1900. Phosphate was mined until 1979 after 1,080 of the island’s 1500 acres had been stripped and rendered uninhabitable, and twenty million tonnes of phosphate had been extracted and scattered over the farms of New Zealand and Australia to revitalize the soil for grassland pastures. The indigenous population was removed to Rabi, an island 2500 kilometres away, part of Fiji. Katerina Teaiwa invited me to make an exhibition about the tragic story of her father’s island.

The history of Banaba is a microcosm of European and Pacific Island relationships and illustrates the extreme of what damage can be done it justified as ‘progress. The black and white archival photos that Katerina had sent to me in Switzerland and initiated my research did not tell the whole truth. The British colonial uniforms belied the fact their owners were actually New Zealanders, one of whom was Sir Albert Ellis himself, who discovered the phosphate and immediately secured a contract with the “king” of the island, agreeing to pay fifty pounds for 999 years to the natives for the ‘lease’ of their soil. As land was individually owned and there were no chiefs on Banaba, identifying one man as “king” was problematic.

The ‘natives’ in these photos were in fact Gilbertese, the Banabans refused to work for the British Phosphate Commission and thus destroy their own land. “The natives unanimously refused to sell any more land, declaring that the lands, and the palm and pandanus trees thereon are all they have and they asked what they shall do when the big steamers have carried away their habitable land...”(Melbourne Press 1174/1093).

Although seemingly a simple case of exploitation confirming the ‘black and white’ of it all, reducing history to the binary of colonial power versus helpless native once again, the complexity of the situation is a theme in Teaiwa’s thesis. For example, she writes how Banaban history defies any linear logic of western progress and development observing that the island environment went from ‘primitive’(pre 1900) to ‘civilized’(1900 to 1979) and back to
‘underdeveloped’ “because of the activities of capitalist industry and the manipulation of the British Colonial Administration” (Teaiwa 2002). The idea of Europeans bringing light, soap, and civilization to the islands only lasted while there was phosphate to be taken. With the threat of Japanese invasion in World War Two or with the extraction of the last phosphate rock the company bolted, leaving their machinery, bull dozers, bath tubs, crushing machines and buildings where they stood, to rust in perpetuity. These represent a history now abandoned.

Another inconsistency in the duality between the all powerful and victim is an acknowledgement of the colonizer’s dependency on Nauru and Banaba. In 1962 Talboys wrote “The superphosphate that we manufacture locally from Nauru and Ocean Island accounts for ninety percent of the total fertilisers used in New Zealand. When this supply was cut to the source during the World War Two, New Zealand was reminded sharply and unpleasantly of her reliance on Nauru and Ocean Islands. Because our primary industry is so closely linked with our national welfare, the whole nation and not just our soil was effected” (Tyrer cited in Teaiwa 2002).

Such a dependency has resulted in a kind of resentment, a national denial. Banaba is acknowledged in the National Archives yet is all but forgotten in the public memory, Banaba, or ‘island of rock’ also called ‘buto’ or navel of the earth by its people, is but a skeleton of its former body. All that remains are the coral columns that protrude from the sea, the troughs and merlons, and abandoned machinery. The mutual dependency of colonizer and colonized, of receptacle of extraction and substance itself, struck me as a powerful image.

In the installation, the image of the coal bath from ‘Podes Antipodes’ has in essence been resurrected as phosphate container. The blackness of coal, so often interpreted as moral and racial impurity, has become the whiteness of phosphate. The bath as a cleansing vessel also symbolises baptismal font, where the sea is contained and the unholy must undergo a ceremonial drowning, to begin life anew in western tradition. Thus the container or font is symbolic of the ocean, the realm of the Underworld from which the souls of men are saved by Christ, the Fisher of Men. Both coal bath and phosphate receptacle therefore, are my initial and final response to the colonizer’s history in the South Seas: black bath for black deeds perpetuated perhaps, but transformed into white vessel for deeds of a whitened civilization. The western moral codes of black for sin and white for virtue have undergone a transformation. The white phosphate was extracted to become a white dust, scattered over England’s newest colonies to renew those chosen isles to the detriment of others. The white body of the land that had once nurtured an island people had in a sense become their undoing, their finality, their tomb, forever lost and to be grieved over, romanticized and longed for, although its substance had long since been removed.

Above hovers the legacy of colonial might. Remnants of technology, the very tools of industry that once symbolized a civilization’s superiority over another, that have been left abandoned on the island. In the installation images of the past have been projected onto these, perhaps suggestive that the objects contain a memory. A digger scoops up the phosphate with the regularity of a heart beat, oblivious to its impending mortality; aeroplanes scatter the dust of Banaba over barren highland country in New Zealand, a Banaban dance troop re-enact in perpetuity the tragic history of their island for the next generation.

The purpose of my research has been to examine the complexities that exist in the relationship between colonizer and colonized. My ambition has been to create a visual imagery and symbolism that is true to the spirit of previous work but that addresses the duality, the binary that exists between Pākehā/European and Māori/Pacific perceptions. This is not to deny the multiplicity of viewpoints from one island nation to the next, a European nation to its neighbour let alone individuals. It is the attempt of one through ideas and art to link places as different as Scuol and Banaba, the mountains of the Alps and the valleys of Waikato, not to find a mirror image of the other but to illustrate how human experience entwines us all. Switzerland hosted English tourists who travelled to the Alps to convalesce. Their countrymen
were invading Waikato and Taranaki as they bathed. Their sons and daughters reduced another pacific island to dust making Aotearoa resemble England's "green and pleasant" fields. By this the nation prospered, benefiting also Maori freezing workers and farmhands working the very land that had been confiscated from their ancestors, less than a century before.

The body of work for the three exhibitions creates a visual statement that considers the complexities in the relationship between colonizer and colonized. In response to the research question, "how has the South Pacific and its peoples been perceived in the minds of its European colonizers?" I travelled to Europe and created the exhibition 'Podes Antipodes'. Here I attempt to unravel why Europeans perceive South Seas peoples in a particular way. I have traced a line of thought from the first European explorers in the Pacific back to thinkers such as Rousseau and then in turn, to the bucolic existence of Alpine life that had once influenced Rousseau. Having had the opportunity to live and work in the Alps I created a body of work that returns the gaze of the colonizer back upon himself, as I critique not only how Europeans perceive the Pacific, but perceive their own history. The second exhibition entitled 'Moengaroa' addresses the question "how has the colonial experience and European colonial been perceived by Maori?" Here I examine and respond to the extent to which Europeans have repressed Maori identity. I use new materials that can be illuminated because I enjoy the paradox that light can be both positive and destructive. In response to the third question, "did the nation's focus on biculturalism influence its relationship to other Pacific nations?" I have created the final exhibition, 'Kāinga Tahi, Kāinga Rua' which examines New Zealand's part in the history of phosphate rich Banaba Island. The hieratic placement of objects in the exhibition implies the relationship of colonizer to colonized has not changed, although there are complications. For example, other Pacific Islanders contributed to the island's destruction and Maori also benefited by the use of phosphate on New Zealand soils. The exhibition allowed me the opportunity to make more widely known the history of Banaba, by the use of new media.

The implication for Maori research is that it is possible to engage in sculpture and installation that extends our understanding of the bicultural condition, and thus may serve as a bridge to understanding both our Pacific neighbours and our treaty partners.

"I haere Maori atu, i hoki Maori mai".

"I left as a Maori and I have come back as a Maori". Words of King Tāwhiao after he and his delegation went to England and were unsuccessful in seeking an audience with Queen Victoria, nor any resolution to the confiscation of his lands.
Kāinga Tahi, Kāinga Rua

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13. Kāinga Tahi, Kāinga Rua exhibition (video projections), Newmarket Studio, Auckland. 2004
14. Photograph of original bath at Scuol-Nairs Kulturzentrum, Switzerland. 2001
15. Photograph of Hospital Staff, Banaba, 1910's.
16. Photograph of Sir Albert Ellis, British Phosphate Commission Management and Gilbertese workers, Banaba, 1900's.
17. Photograph of wharf and cantilever, Home Bay, Banaba, 1900's.