



Darryn George.

Unfolding language

An interview with Darryn George

In his 15th year of making art, Darryn George embraces the Maori heritage he was once estranged from, alongside the deep roots of Christian belief and experience. Through his work, he is able to reconcile the two worlds.

It's always inspirational to search into the point of intersection at which an individual's Christian faith meets, enters or translates itself into the arts.

Darryn George was raised as a Christian, European New Zealander with a Maori heritage. He's now some 15 years into his art practice and the diverse threads of these histories emerge, are wrestled with, worked through and presented as the unfolding substance of his life and work.

It positions him within the generation of *potiki* (the younger generation) of impressive Nga Puhī (northern Maori) arts practitioners - painters, scholars, historians and writers; amongst these are Buck Nin, Muru Walters, Clive Arlidge, Ralph Hotere, Hone Tuwhare, Jonathan Mane-Wheoki, Dr Deidre Brown, Kura Te Waru Rewiri, Maureen Landers, Shane Cotton and Lisa Reihana.

Maori world, however, is territory of relatively recent arrival for Darryn George, of whom it's written that he was embarrassed about being Maori when he was young. It's more likely his disquiet was about knowing less than was comfortable of the world he had inherited - *whakapapa* Maori.

'In my early art-making years, I couldn't make any connections to Maori art, either the contemporary or the traditional forms. In fact I believed I had an aesthetic not tuned to such art forms.'

Going back to an earlier starting point in his fifth form year at high school, art teacher Colin Loose infused sufficient confidence in him to convey he was good at making art. 'I didn't realize the potential of that and of many compelling ideas until my last year at Uni.'

What he wanted to delve into were the marks and symbols of his Christian heritage. The problem was that he was making the work but it had nothing of himself in it. 'My question was - how do I create a language?'

Things started to change when he went to a Maori arts hui in Whangaraa (Poverty Bay) where, in esteemed company, he affiliated easily with the thinking of those there. In fact he found that elements of his own upbringing he once thought weren't overtly Maori, belonged in that environment.

However nothing changed his mind about Maori spirituality. It simply didn't mix with him. 'I was approached by a man at that hui who knew Christian truths were important to me and he said: "you must realize you can use the vocabulary of Maori imagery to translate Christian ideas and thinking".' (*Ribs – The Whare of Moses*)

Something else happened in that period of time that was important. He took his new-born baby to a *powhiri* and found himself moved deeply when he heard afresh, in that place, *waiata* his father had also played through his childhood. Something opened in his spirit that day - enough that he could glimpse *wairua* Maori. He acknowledged this was a time when deep seeds were sown, that these people were his people, his whanau, and his Maori heritage was to be embraced and celebrated.

Darryn George graduated from the University of Canterbury's School of Fine Arts in 1993. His lecturers came from outside the culture and they brought international influence and perspective to his thinking. They encouraged him to step outside known institutional boundaries to pursue his native, indigenous history.

Lecturer Riduan Tomkins introduced Darryn to the work of Richard Diebenkorn, known for translating man-made divisions of the natural landscape into subtle angular abstraction.

Italian Mimmo Paladino's works – sometimes



Kowhaiwhai #5,
Darryn George, 2005, oil on canvas, 180 x 180mm.



Ribs - The Whare of Moses,
Darryn George, 2005, oil on canvas, 2000 x 1500mm.

Hoani Kaiiriiri,
Darryn George, 2004, acrylic on hardboard,
11650 x 2800mm, Collection: Wellington City Gallery.
Photo: Michael Roth, Courtesy of Wellington City Gallery.

described as earthy, surrealist, spiritual poetry, and 'supernatural aspects of human experience' - was where there was currency for him.

Established and represented nationally and internationally, and in a position of luxury as an art teacher in residence at Christ's College in Christchurch, he describes himself as an abstract arts formalist. He is known for his lined works, meticulously textured surfaces and interesting and different use of colour that occurs partly as a result of his colour-blindness.

It's in his *Tipuna* series of work that the diversities of Christian experience and Maori knowledge marry.

Sarah Farrar talked, in *Telecom Prospect 2004*, about his work in his ongoing *Tipuna* series which has as its starting point the *Poutama* (Stairway to Heaven) design found in *tukutuku* panels of meeting houses.

'I was particularly attracted,' George explains, 'to the conceptual idea behind the "Stairway to Heaven" design, in that it pointed to Tane (an ancestor) who had gone on before the people and who had gone into heaven.'

The titles of the works in the *Tipuna* series are Maori transliterations of the names of Biblical characters (other ancestors of faith who have gone to heaven).

One of his intentions with this series was to make a tribute using symbols of salvation. He achieved this through the work *Manasseh*, an evil character in the Bible who is represented in a black painting in the configuration of a swastika. In its negative space is the form of a cross - the symbol of both strength and salvation.

Another significant outcome of the series, possibly overlooked, is the well known concept of Maori thinking *i tuku iho* - knowledge handed down generationally through *whakapapa* (inherited histories).

These are qualities that emerge, are evidenced in his meticulously painted lines, in the same way that the carved marks and lines of a *tohunga whakairo* (carving expert) are made and read on wood or skin.

In the lines there is unmistakable evidence of preparation, of things having been thought about, of accuracy of mark and line, of upholding or maintaining its pattern, of a link to an eternal continuum.

These qualities all knit together with ease and humour through what he calls the 'feel' mechanism. 'It's all about feel. If a work doesn't have that feel, I've got to go back and re-work the thing.'

'Feel' is, in his thinking, an essential part of making and reading art. It's a highly intuitive reading process that reports the accuracy of a mark back to its maker the moment it's made. At every step it's articulate and measured through the inbuilt mechanism of instinct and spirit.

One of the successes of his work is a balance between calculation, research and method that gives way to working by 'ear', instinct and grace.

Moana Tipa

