

# I bring myself ... I bring my broken humanity

**An interview with artist Andrew Panoho** (Ngati Te Uriroroi, Ngati Parawhau, Ngati Hine)

Looking over Andrew Panoho's monumental art works and writings, there's an impression of a life marked, hewn, cut into, carved and being shaped.

A son of two war-faring nations, of Nga Puhi (Maori) and Scots descent, he's one of three boys; young men raised mostly by a Scottish mother. He didn't grow up knowing his father and he'd probably say that his search for identity, for self and for his roots started right there.

He also says that the paternal void of his Maori heritage was only partially filled by adolescent contact with his father's family and marae visits during high

network of established and emerging Maori artists set up in the 1970s to strengthen the vision, voice and presence of Maori arts and practitioners across the country. He made a concerted choice at that time not to use Maori art forms until the deep-set issues relating to his father and te ao Maori (Maori world) were resolved in him.

In 1991 he exhibited at the *Memphis in May* Festival USA; *Te Poho o Ihu Karaiti (Shoulder of Affection - Jesus Christ)* and continued travelling on to London where he planned to set up a studio. It was a demanding time in many ways; he'd left familiar



Andrew Panoho and his work:  
*A Change in Season*, 1998, watercolour on paper,  
185mm x 6.45m (triptych). Part of the Chrysalis Seed  
group exhibition, 12, in 2003. Kauri Trust collection.  
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school years. Not having his Dad around meant that every-day self-knowledge remained untouched, beneath the surface. "Like a lot of my Maori and Polynesian mates around me, there was a huge search to understand cultural identity in a Pakeha world." But art was a currency he knew and was comfortable with from the time he was young. People said he was good at it.

At six he reasoned that he'd be an artist later on and began drawing with purpose. At seventeen he was accepted to exhibit his first paintings, and when he was 23 he'd completed a Masters in fine arts at Elam School of Fine Arts (Auckland University).

In that six years at Elam, amongst many things, he came into contact with *Nga Puna Waihanga* a national

land, family, friends, an arts environment and what he describes as 'pampered security'. Identity had emerged out of what he had accomplished. Art brought the affirmation he sought.

He was accomplished in sport as well. "So when I found myself in London, those sources of affirmation just weren't there. It was as good as being in a desert until I saw that the Lord was in the middle of it, and had in fact instigated it. More important than the emptiness I was feeling, was the lack of worldly success or what I perceived as success. And that really was the point in question; it was time for those areas of identity to be dealt with.

"I would spend my pre-dawn hours in prayer at the side of the muddy river Thames. I love to pray beside



*Adam where are you?*, Andrew Panoho, 1998, watercolour on paper, 134 x 173cm. © Reproduced courtesy of the artist.

water. They were painful and yet profound times of hope communing with my God. Many of my landscapes are records of those times. *Son Rise at Barnes Bridge*, 1997, *Son Rise at Chiswick Bridge*, triptych, 1997, trees and forest-scapes likewise were places of transcendence, points of reference connecting me to the Father's presence.

"Water is a metaphor, a symbol – and watercolour as a medium is spontaneous and a very challenging, hard medium to master - I love it. Rivers speak of transitions, baptisms, death, on and on I could talk.

"In material terms I had everything I needed. From daily bread, to a three storey studio in the centre of London. I started fellowship in a small Anglican congregation that became my church family for the period I was in London.

"The liturgical content of those Anglican services became a compelling thread of expression in the art made in that time; church services well put together in a beautiful language. I took elements of that liturgy and created visual images alongside it. Part of the Anglican / Anglo Catholic tradition is their strength and use of metaphor and a basis of art is metaphor. To engage with Yahweh through the medium of the arts, is a powerful part of arts practice."

Through the spiritual guidance of the vicar of that Anglican Parish - Reverend Bill Heald - the man who had become a father figure to Andrew, the language and marks of te ao Maori (Maori world) began to emerge in his work in the form of kowhaiwhai (scroll ornamentation) and tamoko (imprint by tattoo). Through that providential relationship, a 're-parenting' occurred – a result of which was that he was able to connect with some of the imagery of his father's world of te ao Maori.

The work that was finally birthed out of that desolation in London in the winter, of the nine and half years in London, 1990-1999, was *Faith*, a series of huge watercolour works. Interesting also, that the underlying marks in the very large *Faith* painting, show up as a korowai (cloak) of many weavings, a covering, multi-layerings of spirit, the whakapapa (genealogy)

of substance built into the man, and in turn showed up as the ground that that particular work was grown and shaped out of.

"So my time in London opened up new forms of creative expression. I became at ease about using both traditions. Half of my painting became kowhaiwhai and tamoko images and the other half was figuratively based. In my eyes, both traditions are distinct because they are expressed from differing world orders and involve completely different processes of creative thought. An enforced synthesis of these art traditions, in my experience, is not possible. I don't mix them so as not to muddy the particular vantage point that each provides."

A viewer of his work might argue that there appears to be a natural synthesis of the two traditions - the ritual of liturgy which inspired Andrew so deeply, and the ritualised language and order of kowhaiwhai in the work *Faith*.

In a letter he wrote home to his brother in this period Andrew says, '... I'm seeing the elemental curvilinear forms of the so-called 'classical Maori arts' as a natural extension of the 'cyclic' or 'seasonal' world view of life. It's strange but somehow this revelation has been as a missing key that has previously eluded me and kept me from using our own traditional art forms as resource material. I am now more at ease with tamoko and kowhaiwhai and have begun using them for their value in communicating theological truths...'

His figurative paintings - *Preparation Studies*, *How do you do?*, 1995 – 1997; *Baptism of Fire*, 1996 – 1997; *Alas I knew him well – too well*, 1997; *Adam where are you?*, 1998; present a theme which occurs again and again – 'the body as a tool of worship'. About this he says "transparency before God and transparency before mankind is hinted at in the nakedness of the figure. In our sexually distorted culture, nakedness is allied to lust or shame, however in these paintings I view nakedness as honesty and vulnerability".

The notion that painting is a priestly art is something Andrew Panoho continually articulates and, increasingly, others also recognise. At the core of this dialogue, is his early search for identity, which led him to eventually encounter Christ. The search would take on different dimensions from that point; something he describes as 'upwards and inwards – up into the realm of God and inwardly towards my own humanity'.

"Painting is a discovery of self that is personal and deeply spiritual. To paint is to be in a place where I am aware of the presence of my Creator and I am aware of the need to articulate whatever is within me at that moment. I bring myself, my memories, I bring my broken humanity, I bring physical paint and brushes and I journey on paper and canvas to the place that is unburdened, released, washed, resolved in the presence of God. It might be that one of the roles of an artist is to articulate that inner dimension."

These days Andrew Panoho is at home in Blenheim, New Zealand with his wife Anna and three young children. They're establishing their family, a home, and a working studio.

## Moana Tipa