

He toi whaakairo, he mana tangata Where there is art, the people flourish ...

An interview with Megan Tamati-Quennell (Te Atiawa, Ngai Tahu)
Curator, Visual Art and Culture, Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, New Zealand

"Art is the recording of humanity. They mark our place and time here on the earth. You go back into France and the caves at Lascaux and there is rock art like we have rock art. As soon as there were people, there was some recording of life and vision. And people still do it. Kids do it naturally. I'm so impressed with my boy's drawings because they're so pure. What he sees is what he draws. I love abstract work because that's where things can be opened up and be as broad as they need.

"Art is important and artists are important people, some of them. There's a lot of surface rubbish. Some aspects of the art world are not great to be around, but the work, the essence or spirit of what people produce, is amazing. I fell into working in the area really. I ended up doing an internship in the National Art Gallery when they offered internships for the first time in 60 years since opening in the 1930's. I chose to work in the contemporary area because I loved art and because at that time there were very few Maori involved in art galleries, no one in the National Art Gallery. I felt it was important we (Maori) were present and represented in a contemporary sense, not just frozen in time, because I knew we were still making work and had things to say.

"I worked downstairs first in the National Museum, in the time when the art gallery sat above the Museum, and found it interesting that Maori would go to the Museum and look at the taonga but would never go

upstairs to the art gallery because there was nothing there for them. It was a whole world, an intellectual, cultural and spiritual world that we were not part of, were locked out of, and I wanted to open that up, offer an entry in for those who wanted it, if I could.

"So what else has taken me into nga toi Maori – (the arts of Maori)? I'm sure it was wairua (spirit). I know it was. I went through mate Maori (Maori sickness) when I was 22. I was blessed and cared for by my family during that time, by people like my Uncle Sonny Waru. I came out the other side of that to enter a journey through raranga (weaving) and working with weaver Diane Prince for a year and then at Waiwhetu Marae with Erenora Puketapu Hetet, who asked me to come and work with her. I am connected to Erenora through whakapapa on my Taranaki, Te Atiawa side. I knew I could weave before I ever began to weave and I loved it. It taught me and gave me heaps. I still weave sometimes. I went through that time and it pushed me further into the arts.

"In 1990 I started working at the National Art Gallery. Everything I had done to date at that point had formed a foundation to my curatorial work in a way. I had a background in journalism; I had a calling to write when I was young, wanted to be a journalist even at school at 13 or 14, but I found journalism very disappointing especially newspaper journalism. I worked in print media. I was interested, and worked briefly, in the area of film.

Megan Tamati-Quennell and son Taniora.
Photo: Moana Tipa.





Ake Ake Huia, Fiona Pardington,
Unframed silver gelatin print, 450 x 650mm.
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"As a journalist I worked on a preview supplement of *Te Maori - Te Hokinga Mai* for the *Evening Post*, that turned my thinking entirely. They gave the most junior reporter the most significant task of previewing that exhibition before it opened in New Zealand after being in New York at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and other places. I don't know if they realised its importance.

"I got to talk to people like Hirini Moko Mead, Wiremu Cooper, Maui Pomare, my Aunt Marge Raukupa who were all involved in that exhibition. I was young, 19 maybe, and maybe it was wairua back then, but the impact of writing about that exhibition and the bringing together of those taonga, was major and I knew it. I also sort of knew I would have something to do with them in the future. That exhibition was a pivotal point and there was a shift in me.

"Working with contemporary Maori art, although I had chosen to do that, became even more important after I had been to New York and Seattle in 1993 and saw within that context, that Native American artists were still not collected, shown or represented in large institutions like the MOMA or the Met (Metropolitan Museum of Art). They were not part of that art history. I thought in New Zealand with contemporary Maori art it could be different, we could be present.

"I have always been someone who has worked outside the square. Someone who wanted to help effect change, for good. I worked at one stage for the Wellington Unemployment Union running a journalism course for unemployed. That was when I was 20, which is quite young to carry, do that... I was involved with Te Manu Aute, Maori in the area of communication. I got involved in film through them, through people like Barry Barclay.

"I'm not a surface skimmer; at times I wish I was. I do what I do because I believe in it. I can't really do things that I don't believe in, I find that really hard. I love working with art and with artists. I do think it is important.

"If a work is good you have an instinctive response to it. If a work contains within it a truth, you can read it, see it, and feel it, it's not necessarily tangible.

"It's my perception of what needs to be done in order that the truth can stand, that forms the basis of my work. Sometimes you are a facilitator rather than a curator, you can help make things happen; make them unfold.

"I've always thought the role of the curator was partially to create the space, the environment that is conducive, that would support, so that the artist can do what they do best.

"Taonga Maori are different than contemporary arts. They come from a different place. Because of their nature they have a wairua (spirit), a depth. They are whakapapa (genealogy) and are imbued with things that come out of our culture that are deep, old and spiritual. We had the capacity to understand the natural world and the world of spirituality. We had a command of those things and a depth of understanding. They were structured into our culture, so taonga come out of that. They have a power. I can't necessarily carry them. I am not sure I am supposed to.

"I like contemporary work because it's lighter, because they're of now and I can work with them easily. Taonga

Maori carries a residue of something that might have been transferred into them because the taonga came out of the ground, the river, the earth or out of something based in spirit, because of what surrounded it. Contemporary struggles are mostly not regarded in this way and not every artist accesses the dimension of spirit.

"Art to me is about the things that people envision and understand. It's about connections, ideas and always about people, sometimes in the broadest sense – a representation of us as humans.

"I looked at the work of Mark Rothko when I went to New York for the first time in my life. His huge colour fields were like doorways that you could step through. Good art can take you from one place to another. You can have an emotional or spiritual response to someone like Mark's work, you don't have to 'understand it', know academically about it. You can still experience it without having that background or knowing that. I saw those paintings at the Metropolitan in New York and they absolutely moved me.

"I wonder sometimes if good art is work that is consistently beautiful, art that has intensity and a depth that keeps unfolding or causes a response or reaction in you. It can be in anyone's work, whatever culture. Some artists may not be entirely conscious of what they're doing or what is contained within the spirit of their work.

"Some of McCahon's work remind me of Rothko's beautiful colour fields - *Into this pure land is a constant flow of light*... His *Jet Out* series moved me, his series of waterfalls. In his biblical references he never actually stated he was Christian, maybe he was, maybe he wasn't. I think he tried to understand Maori spirituality and maybe he got close to it, like in his *Beach Walk* work, maybe he didn't, maybe he used a western logic to try and understand it. At least he knew it existed, we existed, sign posted our existence to the art world ...

"Hotere's works of black on black throughout his career are works that contain an essence for me, a depth, a substance, a knowing... maybe that is to do with faith, belief. His *Black Light* work with Bill Culbert is beautiful and poetic. Lots of his work is to me. Shane Cotton's work, Brett Graham's work about this place, within this land and culture. I don't know if faith translates into their work, that might be putting a layer that's not there, but their work has something that can be read and felt. When I first looked at Fiona Pardington's photograph *Ake Ake Huia*, I seriously ached, it was so beautiful. It was sublime. The image was just the tail feathers of a bird held in a Museum collection, but was the best work I'd seen for a very long time. Maybe that is just the seductive nature of photography, but I don't think so. I think it is more than that. She talked about it when I talked to her recently in an interview about standing in the stream of something with her work... and transference. If there were something that is manifest in her work then I would argue that it comes from within her. It is her eye and hand that makes the work. Not everyone operates on that level."

Moana Tipa

To be continued: October 2005 CS News - Issue 22