Kura Te Waru Rewiri
(Ngati Kahu, Ngati Raukawa ki Kauwhata and Ngatirangi)
in conversation with Moana Tipa

Kura Te Waru Rewiri. Photographer: Kerri Vernon.

Another view

In the late summer of 1989, whilst hurrying through Auckland's narrow waterfront streets to catch the ferry, I was surprised and compelled by images in the window of the Gallery Pacific. The works were by a Maori expressionist painter, Kura Te Waru Rewiri. *Covenant*, a triptych made for the 1990 Celebration of 150 Years of the Treaty of Waitangi, stirred my interest in a way I barely understood. For years to come, I would search out those signature-layered marks. I'd also look for them in the vocabularies of other artists. Eighteen years later, I would return to look at the work through my experience of Christ, Christianity and covenant relationship.

There were three threads of interest: Kura's documented whakapapa (genealogies and histories), the title of the work *Covenant* and her layered painting style. Following the principle of Maori thinking *he taonga i tuku iho* (giftings handed down, those set in both the spirit and the genetic patterning of a person), I expected to see some reflection of these elements in her work. While the title *Covenant* points towards the covenant of the Treaty of Waitangi, there was reference to biblical covenant, well-known to her parents and the generations before them. Through her layered marks, Kura draws similarities with those of traditional Maori practitioners—carvers and weavers. She says the marks also represent political, social and cultural influences of the time.

Kura Te Waru Rewiri

The curator of the exhibition *Forever Nin*, Jonathan Mane-Wheoki, describes Dr Buck Nin as '…one of the most important artists of the twentieth century who played a pivotal role in the development of Maori art and education.

'Buck Nin followed in the footsteps of esteemed educator Gordon Tovey and the generation of artists who were involved in the Northern Maori (arts education) Project. He formed close friendships with young Maori artists, the first generation to migrate to urban centres after the Second World War, (and) who were to drive the contemporary Maori art movement.'[1]

Kura Te Waru Rewiri was one of the artists of this generation. Nin was the person to influence her thinking and literally propel her to enrolling at Ilam, Canterbury University's School of Fine Art in Christchurch, where she graduated with Honours in 1973.

'Buck organised for me to go to Ilam Art School. He did everything. I honestly can't remember how I got there. He said, "I'll enrol you at Ilam" and I said, "Thank you, Sir". Later on he said, "I thought you should go to Ilam because Elam is not for you." I didn't know where Elam or Ilam were, so it made no difference to me.'[2]

In 1974 Kura attended Christchurch Training College where she qualified as a secondary school teacher. And after a time spent teaching, she was able to work full-time as a painter from 1983 to 1994, when she joined the staff of the University of Auckland's School of Fine Arts.

Oriwa Solomon writes: 'Kura's current works are interpretations of her lifelong experiences with the Ratana Church, especially the religious symbolism associated with, and derived from, TW Ratana. Ratana was referred to as *Te Mangai* (God who speaks through man—the mouthpiece), and his followers as *Nga Morehu* (the remnants). The term 'morehu' denotes the Ratana belief that Maori were the descendants of Abraham and Isaac from the House of Israel.'[3]

TW Ratana

The first decades of the twentieth century were a low point for Maori, both in numbers and in spirit. During the nineteenth century, Maori had lost their tribal way of life, lands, traditional religion, and their mana. Christianity had been accepted, but the missionaries had acted as chaplains to the colonial forces against these Christian converts defending their land. Many Maori regarded the missionary clergy as agents of the Government in a deep-laid plot in the subjugation of the Maori people.

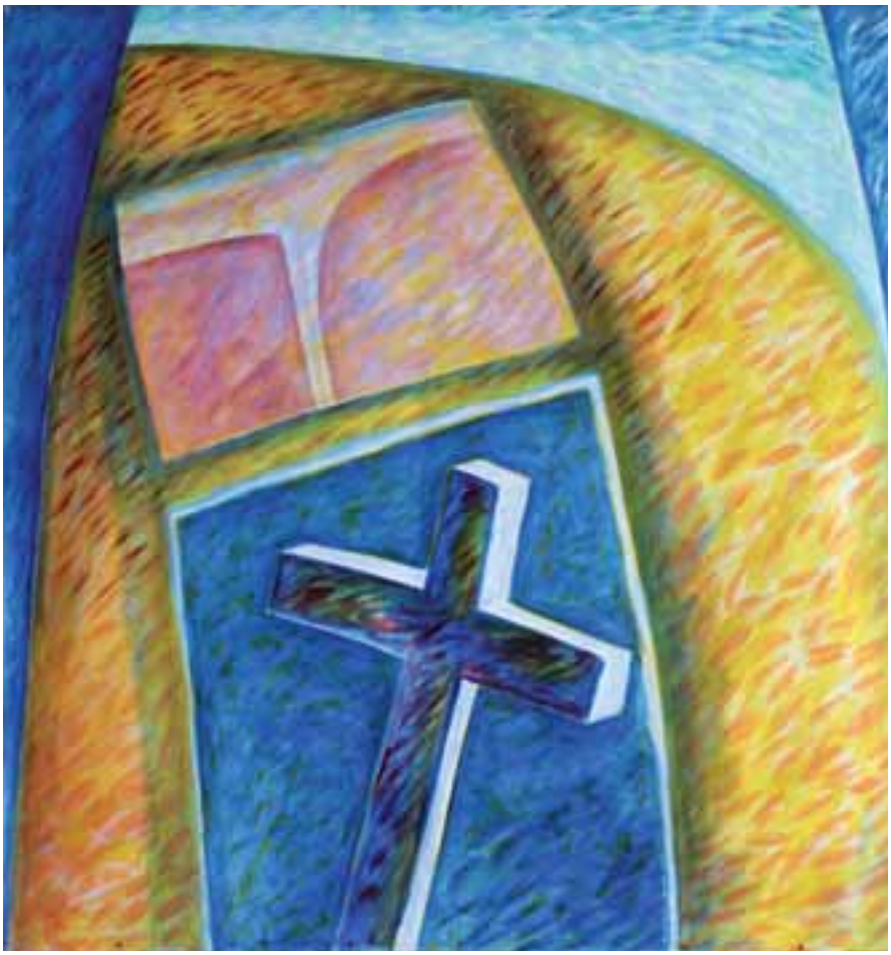
Paradox was the overarching mantle. Deception and land confiscation, coupled with the attraction of new technology, including musket warfare, layered itself into the spirit of Maori, already burdened by generations of utu (reciprocal cost/exchange). It would seem miraculous therefore, that Maori were able to discern and accept the Gospel of truth—given that it was presented by those who were part of the incoming colonist tide of change.

By the early 1860s much had transpired. The Treaty document signed between the British Crown and Maori twenty years earlier had brought increasingly uneasy respite from conflict. The Gospel message, preached amongst Maori for 46 years by then, produced a first generation of response through the Maori prophetic movement. Some of them were Te Ua Haumene (Hauhau Movement), Te Kooti, (Ringatu), and Te Whiti o Rongomai and Tohu Kakahi.

TW Ratana was born on 25 January 1873 in the district of Rangitikei, of Ngati Apa and Ngati Raukawa descent. He was raised by his foster mother Ria Te Ra i Kokiritia Ai Hamuera, baptised into the Methodist Church and named Tahupotiki Wiremu Ratana. In 1918 Ratana saw a vision, which he regarded as divinely inspired, asking him to preach the gospel to the Maori people, to destroy the power of the tohunga and to cure the spirits and bodies of his people. Until 1924, he preached to increasingly large numbers of Maori, and Ratana established a name for himself as the 'Maori Miracle Man'.

Initially, the movement was seen as a Christian revival but it soon moved away from mainstream churches. Many thousands of people, mostly Maori, were touched through Ratana's ministry. However, change was on the horizon and two roads became evident for Ratana. Increasingly concerned with the health, the welfare, and the economy of Maori, in 1923 he made his interest in party politics known. The following year the church committee took control of religious matters and Ratana was freed to deal with the material needs of the morehu (survivors).

The Bible and the Treaty became symbols of the



Covenant,
1990, Kura Te Waru Rewiri,
acrylic and powder on canvas,
1810mm high x 1690mm wide (each panel),
Courtesy of Department of Maori Studies,
University of Auckland.
Photographer: Teodora Tinc.

spiritual and political elements of Ratana's mission. And the Ratana Independent Members of Parliament were the first to represent a political party whose members were mostly Maori. Statutory recognition of the Treaty of Waitangi, righting the confiscation grievances of Maori and equality in social welfare, became major aims of the Movement.[4]

The Treaty

Much is known of the disparity of languages, value systems and beliefs. The circumvention of Treaty agreements by settler governments was played down—euphemised. Fraudulent decision-making processes by the Crown's governors of the day were filed as (its agents) being 'imperfectly acquainted' with the new environment and its people. Nonetheless the new nation teemed in, took up position and within three generations, a very different world order became the dominant voice in the landscape— a voice that would, by necessity, politicise the Maori worldview.

Writer Camilla Highfield says: 'Kura believes that the article in the Treaty which protected the spiritual beliefs and practices of the Maori was lost. The missionaries, particularly in the north, actively discouraged the customary Maori beliefs and practices. They tried to wipe out makutu (curse) and what they regarded as superstitious ideas. The Ratana Church took on European Christianity to reach a compromise between both belief systems.

'… the large 'X' shape placed within a document format on the third panel [of *Covenant*] questions the validity of the marks and signatures of Maori on the Treaty of Waitangi. It is well known that Hobson sent traders to remote places to get chiefs to sign the Treaty. The cross marks placed next to the names could have been made by anyone. In particular, the 'X' symbol questions the Pakeha perception that by signing, Maori were giving away their sovereignty ... to Maori, the Treaty was a covenant, a solemn agreement between iwi and the Queen of England, that the land, sea, sovereignty and spirituality would be protected and respected.'[5]

The Bible

The Old Testament book of Genesis is a book of many beginnings and also states the ways in which God initiates and enters everlasting covenant relationship with his people, generation after generation. This, we can be sure, constituted some part of the Gospel message conveyed to Maori by Christian missionaries since their arrival in Aotearoa in 1814.

Te Akakaramu Charles Royal (Ngati Raukawa) wrote about the power of forgiveness: 'It has been explained to me that one of the most powerful of Christian concepts, one which greatly influenced Maori views on Christianity, was the power of forgiveness. Christ says that if someone should wrong you, turn the other cheek. Now, if we consider a thousand years or more of Maori history where the doctrine of utu or reciprocity commanded one to attack those who attack you (an eye for an eye, maybe), we find a people whose culture is gripped in the consequences of such a view.

"Hobson sent traders to remote places to get chiefs to sign the Treaty. The cross marks placed next to the names could have been made by anyone

"In particular, the 'X' symbol questions the Pakeha perception that by signing, Maori were giving away their sovereignty

'The arrival of the gospel occurred at the same time as an unprecedented escalation of inter-tribal warfare and conflict facilitated by the arrival of the musket and other technology. The doctrine of forgiveness allowed Maori to step out of a system that was getting hopelessly out of control. Hence the doctrine of forgiveness provided peace. Peace was a concept embraced by certain Maori leaders of the time and I am sure that they looked to their own traditions to search for an equivalent Maori concept.'[6]

Dialogue with her father

Kura's father was raised in the traditions and tikanga of *te ao Maori*. His legacy was his stand as an Apotoro of the Ratana Church; the Bible in one hand, and embracing the Treaty of Waitangi with the other. She says they had ongoing arguments in the early 1980s.

'The works concealed my anti-Christian stance, especially in reference to Ratana and that my father had become an Apotoro out of his need to put his life into focus. What could he do to implement the doctrines of Te Hahi Ratana? How could he when he, like many other Maori, was raised to believe in the existence of makutu, tohunga and tapu?

'We lost our land because it was confiscated. It was devious. I put all of those things in a Christian hat. But as I've grown older, I have developed a tolerance for people's beliefs and where I fit in terms of the picture.

'The principles of Christianity are okay by me. *Aroha* is really important. If you don't have that, you can't do much for yourself or anyone else.'

The making of marks

Mark-making is the creative language, vocabulary and voice of Kura Te Waru Rewiri's life and history. The layered marks in *Covenant* represent many influences, one of her earliest being that of her painting tutor at Ilam, Rudi Gopas, whose expressionist/modernist approach to mark-making and drawing, as well as skill in treatments of the medium of paint, was major. Through him she looked at the European movement of art impressionists and began to appreciate the depth of his skill as a painter, an artist and academic.

'Layers of paint and layers of meaning were noted in my work. This was Rudi's style also.'

The marks referenced a number of things from the world of Maori. Raranga (weaving) was one of these with the twining and weaving together of aho (the threads of cloaks), the fragility of the single thread of the kakahu (cloak) and the strength of many threads woven together. The aho is the downward thread and whenu the cross weave: connections of celestial and terrestrial movement.

No less important an influence on her marks is the thousand-year-old Maori tradition of stone tool chiselling Kura encountered in her thesis on pre-European Maori carving. She was taken by the chisel marks on wood and the spaces between the areas of marking of the *hae hae*. In Pre-European Maori carving there was minimal coverage of space. In the carving of wood, bone or stone, there were times when there wasn't a visible mark in the space; but the work was shaped. The space between the areas of pattern was equally important to occupied space.

Another viewpoint

Looking at Kura's work eighteen years later has prompted unexpected and different insights into its richly coloured layers—they appear like coloured rain, impassioned, teeming at speed and at angles out of darkness. I saw them as marks of faith, of confidence, promise and continuum.

They appeared as a kind of foundational, metaphorical earth of the heart; softened, compassionate, made whole and rich in wisdom purchased with unrelenting

Crosses, 2004, Kura Te Waru Rewiri, acrylic on canvas, 2000 x 600mm, used by permission Ferner Galleries.

loss—loss of people, land, language and tradition—over generations.

My line of thinking progressed further: that if we the 'remnant morehu' could forgive the trespasses of that time and since—in the same way that Christ forgave those who trespassed against Him—then the seed of covenant promise set in those early generations would activate in mokopuna (the generations) living today.

In *Mataora, He Tirohanga ki Muri* (looking backwards to the future), Kura Te Waru Rewiri suggests she is guided by the values that have been passed down to her through whakapapa: 'I hope that what comes through is tikanga (right ways). What I tend to work with is reality. It's a reality that comes from within and, with all of us, it may be that our memory banks need to be tapped in order to get back to what we're working with… that is, the Maori belief system. As a Maori artist, I try to embrace the tapu (sacred) nature of being Maori—the tapu nature of our tikanga, of our wairua (spirit) and our whole being, in order to resurrect or reconstruct or redefine what it is that we had. This allows a kind of decolonisation of the self to take place. Even though we are Maori and tangata whenua, my belief is that we have to get through a whole lot of colonial imprinting on our memories. So when I source the tikanga, I know I am seeking the reality of what it was to be Maori and what it is to be Maori.'[7]

1 'Forever Buck Nin', Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu exhibition catalogue. Main essay by Jonathan Mane-Wheoki.

2 Camilla Highfield, *Kura Te Waru Rewiri—A Maori Woman Artist*, Gilt Edge, Wellington, 1999, p3.

3 *Taiawhio: Conversations with Contemporary Maori Artists.* Huhana Smith (ed), pub Te Papa Press, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, New Zealand, 2003, p188.

4 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ratana.

5 *Kura Te Waru Rewiri—A Maori Woman Artist*, p12.

6 Te Akakaramu Charles Royal, *Rangiaatea: A forum for Maori Christianity*, in Stimulus: The New Zealand Journal of Christian Thought and Practice, Vol 6, Issue 2, May 1998, p9.

7 Sandy Adsett, Chris Whiting and Witi Ihimaera, *Mataora—The Living Face, Contemporary Maori Art,* pub David Bateman, New Zealand, 1996, p57.

Waiting to Breathe, 2001, Kura Te Waru Rewiri, acrylic on canvas, 1000 x 1500mm, courtesy of the artist and Ferner Galleries.