

Deep calls to not-so-deep

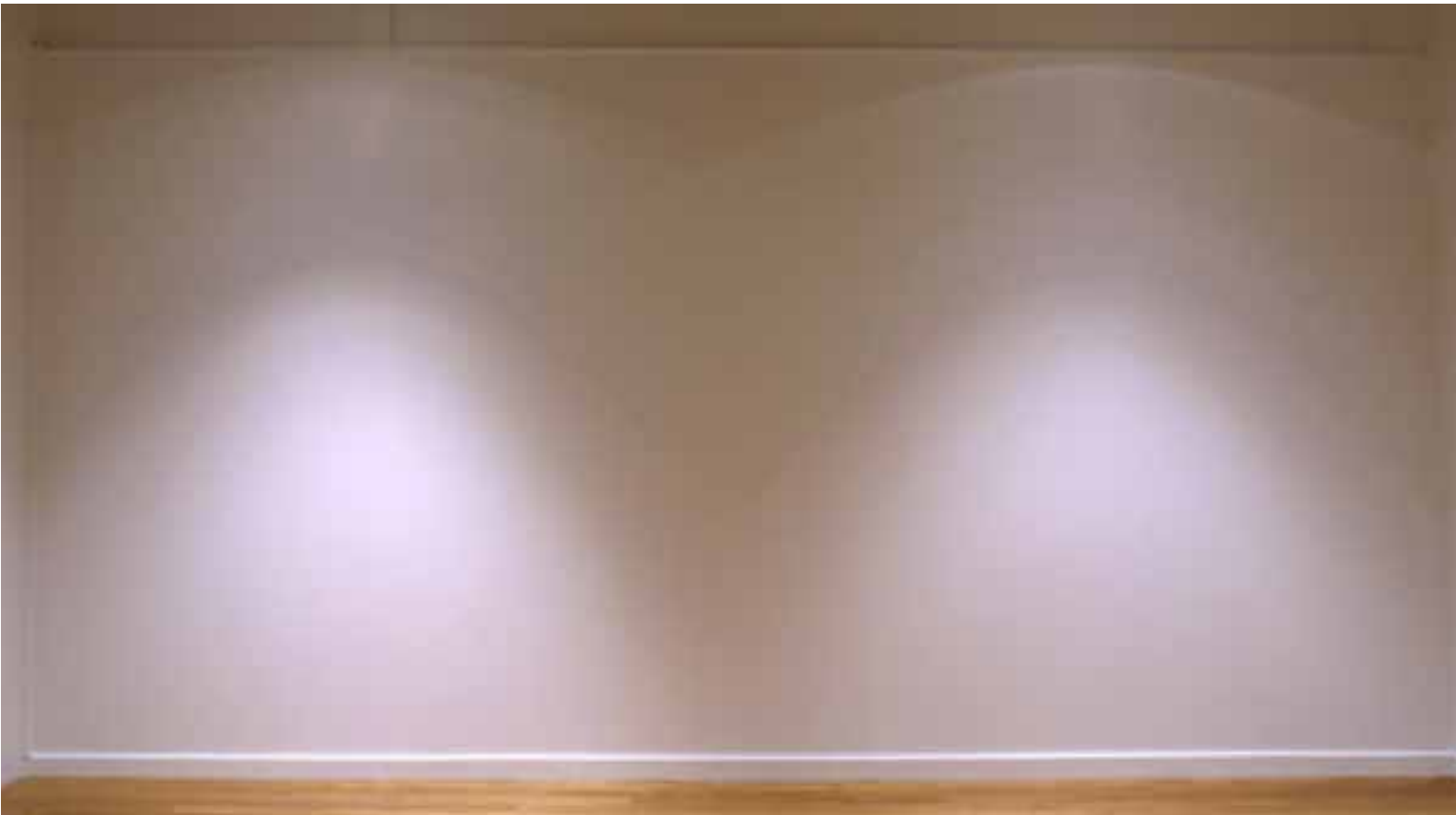
Plumbing the depths of contemporary New Zealand art

Deep calls to deep
in the roar of your waterfalls;
all your waves and breakers
have swept over me.

Psalm 42:7 (The Bible, New International Version)

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

Macbeth, Act V, Scene V. William Shakespeare



Four Spotlights,
Billy Apple, (The original was installed in 1969 at Leo
Castelli Gallery in New York). Installation and recreation
of this work 30 September–17 October 2003 at Ramp
Gallery, Hamilton, New Zealand. Medium: four spotlights.

Words of King David and William Shakespeare, sitting on the same page, illustrate the binary of superficiality and depth. I started out with a noble intention: pointing out significant superficialities that I considered existent in New Zealand art. But delving deeper, I concluded that this is not as easily measured as I first thought. So between these two poles, I've taken a superficial look at a complex space—and some ideas that may have been catalytic in creating this space.

Appropriate appropriation?

The long wending path towards abstraction and modernism in Europe had an extended gestation period. And coming full-circle, modernism gave rise to primitivism, a kind of abstraction based on appropriating motif and icon from so-called 'primitive' cultures. This interest from the West also meant a

revisiting of indigenous belief systems, which had largely been cast out by Christian missionaries. The romanticization of the exotic 'other', like all trends, captured the interest of New Zealand artists too.

Aotearoa, still in her youth, is already up with the pace. The interaction between indigenous peoples and colonisers here has been more recent than the colonial presences felt in the ancient histories of Asia, Europe, the Americas and Africa. To be fair, perhaps our guys Len Lye, Gordon Walters, Colin McCahon and Theo Schoon (among others) were a little closer to issues of indigeness than their European counterparts. Unlike those who appropriated ancient African artefacts that are far removed from much of European culture, pakeha artists in Aotearoa had the opportunity of living amidst the tribal cultures and at least having first-hand experiences.

It could be said that their efforts were pivotal (though still sorely debated in cultural theory circles) in bringing pakeha attention to indigenous art and causes, albeit largely superficially. In this very real sense, superficiality has actually been a catalyst in the conversation of race relations; the corollary of this, though, is that it has also acted as a provocation.

Commodified culture

In Francis Pound's book *The Space Between*, the tension that exists becomes evident. The utilisation of a Maori motif such as the koru by the late artist Gordon Walters is discussed from both poles. His stylisation of the koru was seen to be an act of wanton desecration of something that is of deep significance to Maori. It was being made to perform as a Europeanised, Maori-ish element in a picture.

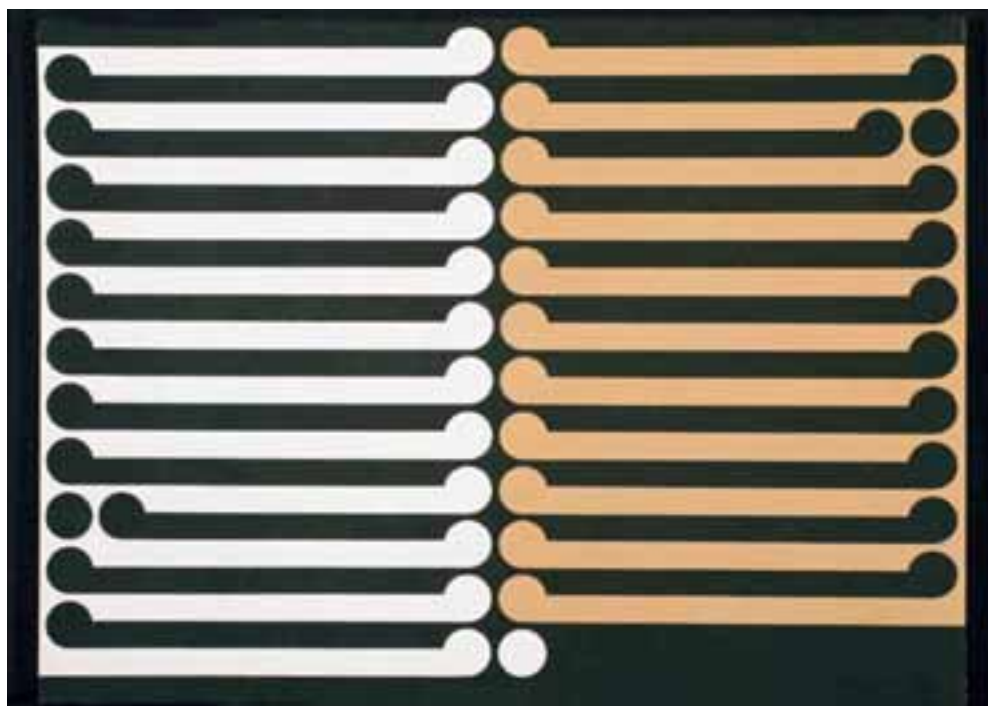
'The deliberate, and, I think, promiscuous plundering of Maori motifs—designs, forms, myths... and that's looking at not only the so-called major artists but many new and young artists... people who should know

with great love for Maori; who was seen to be one of the first European New Zealand modernists who were 'influenced' by Maori. At that time though, this new aesthetic coined a synthetic tribalism in Aotearoa. The commodifying of culture signified a shift towards the secularisation of art. It denuded cultural forms and objects of their spiritual or social significance, and bestowed upon them the new name of 'art'—or a commercial value, like the Hei tiki soaps that became popular in the 1970s.

No objects/no objections

Now, the Object is no longer even central to art. No longer are line, tone, light and other formal pictorial elements valued for themselves. Value now is gauged on cleverness and the new and novel ways in which media can be made to obey the artist's concept.

An early example of this is the famous Billy Apple exhibition that was first realised in New York in 1969 and recreated at Ramp Gallery, Hamilton in 2003. The main work was entitled *Four Spotlights*.



better or at least be receptive to hearing our pain and sensitivities.¹

Ngahua Te Awekotuku's comments above are more reactionary than condemnatory. Her objection is to the artists' (implied by Pound to be Colin McCahon and Gordon Walters²) superficial interpretation and use of motif and form—forms integral to Maori and imbued with spiritual and emotional significance. It is intrinsically an issue to do with spirituality and depth versus a humanistic approach—rendering something down to mere element.

'Taonga are said not only to collapse temporal and spatial boundaries but to blur the Western separation of the material and immaterial world. Maori people respond to taonga as living rather than inanimate things—carvings do not just represent ancestors, they are those ancestors.'³

Pound is an apologist for the utilisation of motif by Theo Schoon, Richard Killeen and of course, Walters—holding him up as an example of an artist

Which is precisely what it was, four gallery spotlights illuminating an anal-retentive clean white gallery space. Billy Apple's work, though clever, skims the surface. But he was definitely interested in the way the white cube works and dismantling the modernist idea of 'gallery'. This work's intent is not to worry about emotion, or existentialism or life or death; it was purely about making the 'gallery' do something we don't expect it to do.

Interpret this!

Interpretation is completely subjective—a more democratic way to view art. But how can we establish value through subjectivity? It is like conversing with oneself in a mirror. Can both an untrained and trained eye assert equally valid judgements on what can be derived from a work of art? Anyone can apply superficial readings of art.

Whilst curating the exhibition *Existence*, I had an experience with a work by Kees Bruin called

Kahukura, 1968, Gordon Walters, acrylic and pva on canvas, 1138 x 1523 mm, Victoria University of Wellington Art Collection.

Musterion. For some reason, the literal nature of the subject completely eluded me. In hindsight, the image of the bride of Christ was so obvious; yet because I have a personality that digs for unseen depth, I construed this work as the act of creation and the bride being the feminine part of God.

Go figure! I did approach Kees and he thankfully gave me clearance for this 'different' interpretation. However, this highlights the slippage between reading a work of art (the signifier) and the artist's intent (the signified).

Fiona Amundsen's photographs of wide-open spaces such as the *Garden Place* series appear as though aliens abducted whole chunks of the CBD's population. The lack of people in these spaces makes this an accurate visual record of Garden Place (Hamilton). However, at the same time, it is asking the viewer to ponder questions. It is accepted that this is obviously not a work about buildings nor is it about people, so what is it about? Where can we define the borders between the *essence* of the picture and *outward appearance*? What can the viewer glean from the space between meaning and intent, especially if there is no apparent meaning? This work is a carefully constructed image and it counts on the viewer's experience of downtown hustle and how they will react to the familiar but oddly unpopulated places. There is such a lavish layering of theory in these works that they almost skate about their ability to be mistaken for mundane photos of an equally dull public space. The very fact that the people are missing is the point.

Those of us ignorant of the theory behind this image and of many über-academic works are left in a quandary, wanting substance and meaning. In the age where the origins of things are abandoned in the pursuit of higher thought, self-referential art, performance-based art and conceptual post-object art can leave an audience cold. Why? Possibly for the same reason that we crave intimacy—we are intrinsically relational creatures.

Strategic superficiality

At first glance, one might immediately link works by Darryn George with geometric abstractionism. Yes, there is a link—superficially only, with the ability of his works to focus on the colours that operate together or in opposition to one another. But because the hidden narrative is not described in visual language (as a Colin McCahon image-and-text work might do) doesn't negate it as a work of depth. These works become more than just a response to colour, shape or relational aesthetics—they signify hidden depth. This subterfuge is a necessary strategy for the artist, serving as an oxymoron. As a Christian, George obviously sees no need to commodify Christian symbolism as an outward sign that he is a follower.

In contrast to his non-use of Christian symbolism is Heather Straka's use of it. This is not with the intention of adoration. She doesn't ask us to view her art as works about the Christ; ergo, a superficial reading of the Christian iconography is quite necessary. Her clever and beautiful application of 'the Sacred Heart of Jesus' to Maori chieftains deifies them by employing the powerful trope of *Messiah*.

This strategically surface use is also the case

with *Crucifixion* by Greg Semu (2000). This was a photographic installation where the artist depicted himself as a crucified Christ. Semu uses the trope of sacrifice in a superficial way: not necessarily to pay homage, possibly even to vilify Christ. Here, he inverts the victim-hood of Christ; *culture* has been sacrificed in the name of its proxy—the crucified Christ. Semu politicises the image of Christ as the metaphor for imperialism. This is a poignant example of the chasm between surface and meaning. Were we to read this work as a Polynesian Christ, this would only scrape the top layer of the narrative.

The supermarket of signs

As a curator, an artist and 'purveyor' of contemporary art, I find that there is almost a necessity for this kind of duality—a façade that appears superficial, yet all the while isn't at all, engaging both the academy and the public.

In a move away from narrative, we come closer to what is happening in the now, and common phenomena become the premise for art shows. In 2002, The Physics Room had the idea of employing the very crude hard-core of marketing as the premise for an exhibition series, cleverly called *HARD SELL!! Because you want it*. This slick and very tongue-in-cheek approach to art through brilliant branding and graphic design utilized the tackiness of the old Warehouse typeface and similar tactics as a curatorial premise for the show. The approach is as unrepentantly hard-sell as it says; but it is indicative of the fact that we are bent on buying, acquiring and wanting more. It strikes a chord with the state of post-modern society. It is out-and-out shallow, and it makes no apologies.

To deem anything superficial or deep would be to take an extreme essentialist position, implying that one system of reading signs is more valid than another. It would appear that this isn't the case. Consumerism and multiplicity of meaning is part of today's social vocabulary, the place where everyone is forced to 'shop'. With art in Aotearoa, we are all lost in the supermarket of signs, and that isn't necessarily a bad thing.

Though Aotearoa's system of signs has in many ways been founded on colonial/post colonial narrative, the distinctive nature of the relationship of Maori/Pakeha signifiers has given us 'fresher' brand than most. Superficial as it might seem, this kind of branding is the stuff of contemporary art. It is branding that is one of the most powerful agencies of communication. And it's the stuff that makes superficiality a space where everyone gets a bargain.

Leafa/Janice Wilson

- 1 Francis Pound, *The Space Between*, p 107, Workshop Press, 1994.
- 2 *ibid.* Pound p 107.
- 3 (Mead 1997a) Conal McCarthy, 'Exhibiting Maori: a history of colonial cultures of display', p 29, Te Papa Press, 2007.



HARD SELL!! Because you want it,
An exhibition series held at The Physics Room,
2002, Christchurch.