

The Carver and the Artist

Date : January 25, 2009

Ross Hemera, SVMC, Massey University

Review of *The Carver and the Artist: Maori Art in the Twentieth Century*

By Damian Skinner. Auckland: Univ. Press. 2008

ISBN: 9781869403737. 224pp. 142 Plates, glossary, index. \$NZ 99.99

E nga mana

E nga waka

Nga Hau e wha

Kia ora koutou katoa

Nga mihinui ki a koutou

No reira

Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa

In January 1973, as a shy young man from the small North Otago high country village of Omarama, I arrived at Epsom Secondary Teachers College, Auckland. With not much more than artistic passion I was completely anonymous in the big city. Although of Ngai Tahu decent I was culturally naïve, with little understanding of Maori language. I thought that Maori art was photographs of carvings in history books.

Not long after arriving I came to the notice of two leaders in the field. As a young secondary school art teacher trainee Dame Georgina Kirby took me under her wing and Arnold Wilson became my mentor. They introduced me to a Maori arts impetus bursting with creative energy and enthusiastic people. I later learned that this creative community had gained its momentum as a result of the

inaugural gathering of the New Zealand Maori Artists and Writers Society at Te Kaha in 1973. Becoming part of this extended Maori art family had a major impact on me and although my art continued to follow references to cubism and expressionism, I soon became familiar with Maori cultural values. I began to realise the importance of identifying as Maori and the significance of networking concepts like whanui (community) and whanaungatanga (kinship).

By 1975 I was a regular member at gatherings of the Auckland Branch of the Maori Artist and Writers Society and in 1976 attended the annual hui at Taurua Marae in Rotoiti. From this point on I found myself totally immersed in a Maori art renaissance, a phenomenon that helped define the shape of Maori art as we know it today. I am referring to the organisation of Maori artists that extended right throughout New Zealand during the 1970s, 80s and 90s known as Nga Puna Waihanga. As a consequence of the kotahitanga (unity) inherent in this community, I began my engagement with Maori culture, started my awareness in te reo and embarked on developing a practice in Maori focused creative arts.

I consider myself uniquely privileged to have developed a personal kaupapa (methodology) alongside so many inspirational and talented people. The Nga Puna Waihanga community advocated “unity in the arts”, “understanding in and through the arts” and “fellowship of artists” (Nga Puna Waihanga 1993, p. 3). The Nga Puna Waihanga legacy is that it did not discriminate between traditional or contemporary art. This theme is referred to throughout the Society’s publication, ‘Maori Artists of the South Pacific’. The book includes traditional whakairo carvers Tuti Tukaokao and Pakariki Harrison, traditional weavers such as Rangimarie Hetet and Digger Te Kanawa side by side with contemporary artists such as Paratene Matchitt, Ralph Hotere and Buck Nin. It was also this legacy that assisted in paving the way for the creation of Ihenga, the whare whakairo at Waiariki Institute of Technology (previously Waiariki Polytechnic) carved by Lyonel Grant in 1996.

As Head of Visual Arts at Waiariki Polytechnic between 1983 and 1994 I was responsible for developing a Maori focused programme. Much of the philosophical basis for this programme came straight from the Nga Puna Waihanga ‘handbook’, as it were. As a graduate of the New Zealand Maori Arts and Crafts Institute, Lyonel Grant was appointed to lead teaching in the wood studio. His appointment reinforced a community based kaupapa (plan) and creative fellowship in the arts. More recently I have continued to develop a deeper appreciation of the context and complexity of Maori visual and material culture and where my own creative practice fits within it. Although no longer operative, the Nga Puna Waihanga kaupapa about collective aspirations still rings true. Consequently, when thinking about Maori art, mine is a view from within and, in the main, is felt rather than studied - experienced rather than theorised.

Against this background I am intrigued with an entirely different perspective regarding Maori art. While his credentials are impeccable and his investigation entirely credible, it is from the ‘outside’ that Damian Skinner examines Maori art. He is, after all, an art historian not a practitioner, using a pakeha view to describe Maori art.

In ‘*The Carver and the Artist: Maori Art in the Twentieth Century*’ Skinner introduces novel perspectives on how Maori art may be appreciated. The book concentrates on the period from Apirana Ngata’s leadership direction, for meeting house construction in the 1920s through to Lyonel Grant’s creative work in Ihenga meeting house at Wairiki Polytechnic in 1996. Skinner uses

an art historian orientated construction as a means of describing and categorising different aspects in this history.

The book sets out to examine and clarify the differences indicated in the title. The inference is that two divergent practices operate within the ambit of 20th century Maori Art. Skinner lays out his framework over the top of this period, introducing us to the Maoritanga carver and the Maori modernist artist. While Skinner publishes against a somewhat scant literary background, we must remember that a “grassroots” vocabulary, used by the Maori artists’ community, has long been considered an appropriate way to describe these differences. Over the last 35 years or so Maori practitioners have commonly referred to these differences by the use of the term ‘traditional’ and its inferred opposite ‘contemporary’. The term traditional is employed frequently in the book *‘Maori Artists of the South Pacific’*. For instance, “Pakariki Harrison claims to be a traditional carver...” (Mataira 1984, p. 31) and Tuti Tukaokao “...is required to work within the confines of the traditional mode...” (Mataira 1984, p. 39). In the booklet *‘Te Moana’*, produced by Nga Puna Waihanga, a succinct use of these terms provides a further example. The second kaupapa (principle) objective reads, “To evaluate the contemporary artists’ movements against the solid background of cultural traditions and heritage” (Nga Puna Waihanga 1993, p. 2).

Latterly, however, a groundswell of debate would ensue at the mere mention of these terms. This may have been the catalyst for further refinement of these initial descriptions. For instance, Maori artist Professor Robert Jahnke (2006, p. 41) uses the term “customary” as a way to describe Maori art practice. The term “customary practice” is then used in conjunction with the arts of the meeting house (Jahnke 2006, p. 48). Moreover, Jahnke suggests that the Kimiora mural by senior artist Para Matchitt is an example of “Trans-customary practice” (Jahnke 2006, p. 48). Professor Jahnke also defines a younger generation of Maori, whose art emanates from “mainstream institutions” as “non-customary art” (Jahnke 2006, p. 41)

In contrast to both the community vernacular and the introduction of the ‘customary’ suite of terms, Skinner presents a new spectrum of Maori art descriptors. Against a background of social, political and economical contexts, the works of carvers aligned with Ngata’s meetinghouse programme are referred to as Maoritanga whereas at the opposite end of the spectrum, artists aligning with the Tovey era are described as Maori Modernists.

Maoritanga is introduced in connection with the carving expert Tuti Tukaokao. Skinner takes care in describing the rationale for the use of this term and links it to Tukaokao’s practice. In doing so, however, he prepares the way with reference to ideas about tradition and custom. At the core of his construction he probes into the expectations placed on, and accepted by the carver, by his people. Skinner thus suggests that “social conscience” is a key characteristic of the identity of the carver (p. 39).

Skinner embarks on an historical survey starting with the Maoritanga associated with Sir Apirana Ngata’s revivalist aspirations for Maori arts and crafts commencing in the 1920s. The journey includes the initiative for the restoration of Maori carving with the opening of the Rotorua School of Maori Arts and Crafts in 1927. Next the intricacies related to balancing between adaptations of pakeha culture and Maori identity are thoroughly examined. Maoritanga is explained in relation to Ngata’s “monument” (p. 31) model for the whare whakairo. It is also in this context that Ngata’s

definition for the term Maoritanga is dealt with. The book examines Maori “individuality” (p. 29) (uniqueness and identity) which is perhaps best expressed as a national style. A significant example of this is Te Tiriti o Waitangi Whare Runanga. This national style originates from Rahrui Rukupo’s, Te Hau Ki Turanga as the “right style” (p. 37)

In 1966 the New Zealand Maori Arts and Crafts Institute opened in Rotorua and is synonymous with the master carver Hone Tiapa. We are given a full explanation of why Hone Taiapa is considered to be the leading figure in whakairo in the 20th century. Skinner draws our attention to the complexities surrounding the Maoritanga practice of Taiapa. It was in the 1950s and ‘60s that the staunch follower of the Ngata Maori model came face to face with Maoritanga’s antithesis, Maori Modernism. Skinner does not shy away from covering the accusations levelled at the institute about “copying” and the carving of “souvenirs” at the expense of innovation (p. 61). Skinner opens the lid on the ambiguity surrounding individual and collective aspirations and of a culture resurrecting whilst simultaneously redefining itself. Resurrection particularly arises in the face of the lingering colonial oppression and redefinition is by way of the adaptation to, and adoption of a Western world.

In the penultimate chapter Skinner finds a champion capable of synthesising this complexity by bringing the two opposites, the carver and the artist, together into a unified whole. In the whare whakairo, Ihenga, Lyonell Grant is both the carver and the artist combing convention with creativity. The importance of Ihenga is that Grant has reconnected customary Maori carving with “whakapapa” (genealogy) and returns them both back into the whare whakairo (p. 184). The pivotal point being that Skinner believes, Grant who is institute trained, would not have been able to achieve this without the advent of Maori modernism and contemporary Maori Art.

The book moves on to Maori Modernism, which began in the 1950s. Much of the credit for its development is attributed to Gordon Tovey. As the Department of Education’s national supervisor for arts and crafts he introduced a group of Maori trainee teachers to modernist art practices. While these early artist explored mainstream aesthetics, like pakeha artists free from customary culture, their art was not yet identified as contemporary Maori art. Skinner takes us through the 1950s and ‘60s examining the creative practice of artists such as Pauline Yearbury, Selwyn Muru and Paratene Matchitt. It is not until the 1970s and ‘80s that we are introduced to Contemporary Maori Art. We are taken inside Tukaki meeting house at Te Kaha for the inaugural meeting of the New Zealand Maori Artists and Writers Society in 1973. Later renamed as Nga Puna Waihanga, this artist centred organization promoted the amalgamation of the “genius” of the ancient past and a return to the Marae (p. 127). The single enigma being that Ralph Hotere’s refusal to comment about his work places him on the margins resisting the lure of the contemporary Maori art title. *‘The Carver and The Artist’* is a bold attempt to address the gap between traditional and contemporary, between customary and non-customary, between Maoritanga and Maori modernism. Even bolder perhaps is the introduction of a European classification system to achieve this. The final section offers a revealing conclusion including a ‘glossary’ of art historical terms. However, just when we have become comfortable with the term modernist as a label attached to an artist such as Arnold Wilson, a trilogy of analytical terms rings out right back to the Maoritanga of Tuti Tukaotao. A resounding crescendo is reached with the terms modernism, modernity and modernisation, used to summarise the critical themes in the book; “cultural expression”, “modes of

experiences”, and “technological and social processes” (p. 204). While drawing together a succinct description of the characteristics of Maori art in the 20th century, the essence is nevertheless to provide us with a guideline on how this episode of Maori history fits into a pakeha model.

I enjoyed ‘*The Carver and The Artist*’. From my position on the inside, I am richer for the insight. A different way of understanding our history is appreciated. I predict that future discourse about Maori art will inevitably refer to the new terminology offered by Skinner. The publication includes a collection of 142 photographs, many of which are rare. In themselves they offer exceptional richness and a visual reality to this history. Along with the text, the publication becomes a treasure at the forefront of recent publications about Maori art.

References:

Jahnke, R. (2006). ‘M?ori Art towards the Millennium’. In M. Mulholland (ed.). *State of the M?ori Nation Twenty-first-century Issues in Aotearoa*. Auckland: Reed. pp. 41-52.

Mataira, K.(1984). *Maori Artists of the South Pacific*. Raglan, NZ: New Zealand Maori Artists & Writers Soc. Inc.

Nga Puna Waihanga. (1993). “*Te Moana*” Nga Puna Waihanga Annual Hui Te Rau Tekau Tau 1973-1993 4 June 1993: (Hui programme). Compiled by Averil Herbert for Nga Puna Waihanga, Rotorua.