

Israel Tangaroa Birch: Ara-i-te-uru

Hone Papita Raukura Hotere, better known as Ralph Hotere, infamously stated, 'I am Māori by birth and upbringing. As far as my work is concerned this is coincidental.'¹ This statement was not necessarily a denial of the Māori dimensions of Hotere's work, but a stance the artist adopted to ensure the wider cultural and social dynamics of his art practice—those outside of Māori culture—would also receive due consideration by New Zealand art audiences. The reality was however, during the 1970s when Hotere made this statement New Zealand art audiences were still struggling to understand how Māori artists could straddle two cultural spheres at once, often finding difficulty in accepting Māori as contemporary artists in a Western sense.² This was evidenced by the fact that contemporary Māori art exhibitions during the 1960s–70s tended to be shown in museums as contemporary artefacts and not in their rightful place within art galleries as new forms of culture. Hotere's strategic self-imposed distancing from ethnic categorisation enabled him to retain aspects of his Māoritanga while empowering Pākehā art audiences to view his practice through an essentially modernist framework—a crucial distinction that saw Hotere become the first artist of Māori descent written into the then Pākehā dominated history of contemporary New Zealand art.³

In recent decades Māori art has gained a greater public profile and acceptance in terms of its important contribution to contemporary New Zealand art. Consequently, artist Israel Tangaroa Birch questions the need to continue distancing Hotere's work from direct Māori cultural interpretations, asking whether all this cultural 'positioning' has actually stifled indigenous understandings of his practice. These questions are explored in Birch's new installation *Ara-i-te-uru* (veil or path-in-the-west) which references some of Hotere's major collaborative light installations with ex-patriot New Zealand artist Bill Culbert, such as *Aramoana* (1991) and *Blackwater* (1999), and deconstructs them from a tikanga (protocol) Māori perspective to investigate unexplored layers of interpretation and ways of seeing Hotere's work.

Ara-i-te-uru, like *Aramoana* (Pathway to the sea), is set in a dark space with a brilliant column of light running down the centre of the gallery. Birch's installation however utilises form, shape, colour and reflection to re-create these columns of light and, like *Blackwater*, it incorporates a large floor-based installation of concertina shaped sheets of spray-lacquered steel. Various curators, art historians and writers have mused over the nature of Hotere and Culbert's use of light and shadow; some posing it as a metaphor for the Māori creation story, others suggesting a more universal mythology which speaks of the light and darkness in all people, or more simply, as in the case of *Blackwater*, to the street lamps which Hotere may have seen reflected across the Otago harbour at night from his Port Chalmers studio.⁴

Birch however likes to relate this interplay between light and darkness to a story passed down to him from his, and Hotere's, Ngāpuhi tūpuna (ancestors) from the Hokianga harbour who were guided to Aotearoa by the light of two very special stars—*Ara-i-te-uru* (also known as *Āraiteuru*) and *Niua* (also known as *Niwa* or *Niniwa*). These two stars were key navigational beacons used by the crew of the waka *Māmari* and *Ngā-toki-mātā-whao-rua* to orientate a south-west coordinate from Hawaiki to Aotearoa.⁵ Each night as the moon and stars emerged out of the darkening firmament, the crew of these waka would see columns of light appearing across the ocean's surface. Bobbing up and down alongside them in the water, these now water-born celestial bodies were personified in oral traditions as supernatural sea-creatures known as *taniwha*. Beckoning them on through the *ārai* (veil) of *te uru* (the west), the crews eventually arrived at the headlands of the Hokianga harbour where they, and their *taniwha*, still reside to this day—*Ara-i-te-uru* in the southern headland and *Niua* in the north.

¹ F. Davis, 'Māori art and artists', Education, 1976, School Publications, Wellington, p.29.

² Jonathan Mane-Wheoki, 'The Resurgence of Maori Art: Conflicts and Continuities in the Eighties', *The Contemporary Pacific*, 1995, 7(1), p.9.

³ Jonathan Mane-Wheoki, 'The black light paradox: The sumptuous austerity of Ralph Hotere's art', *Art New Zealand*, 2001, 98(Autumn), pp.72–7, 91.

⁴ Gregory O'Brien, *Hotere—Out the Black Window*, 1997, Godwit Publishing, Auckland, pp.75–83.

⁵ Hamiona Kāmira, 'Kupe', *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 1957, 66(3), pp.216–231.

Hotere and Birch have shared lineage to these waka, stars, taniwha and to the Hokianga harbour. Both are descendants of Ngāpuhi hapu (sub-tribes), Hotere (Te Aupōuri) himself spending his childhood in Mitimiti, just north of where Niua is said to live today, and Birch (Ngai Tawake) locating his ahi kā (ancestral connection) in the southern Hokianga, Kaikohe area near Ara-i-te-uru.

In his installation, Birch has painted the floor and walls black and placed a large mirror at the rear of the gallery to create the illusion of entering a vast dark space. Out of this darkness Ara-i-te-uru appears as a brilliant gold-red pathway of steel and light. There, reflected in the mirror, is Birch's taniwha, existing in perceived space, both present yet non-physical. Here Birch has created an environment where Māori mythologies mingle with contemporary realities, where people can come to view a real live taniwha, but not as a physical manifestation, but as light and movement, constantly twisting, shifting and morphing in and out of view and existence. In this way Birch gives insight into the elusive nature of these enigmatic creatures and the very real relationship that Māori maintain with them.

Not all taniwha however can be so easily explained in terms of light and metaphor. Puhi-moana-ariki, a more aggressive taniwha who also accompanied these waka on this journey, was charged with protecting the vessels while at sea. Circling them for the duration of the voyage, he alerted the crew to dangerous deep-sea creatures who could be seen riding atop the crests of waves as they rose and dipped with the swell of the sea.⁶ Exactly what Puhi was remains a mystery, however it is from him that Ngāpuhi take their name. Over centuries Ngāpuhi (literally meaning 'of Puhi') have moulded themselves after the protective and pre-emptive characteristics of their guardian taniwha, successfully establishing and maintaining a stronghold in the North and later becoming pioneers in the art of both pre-emptive warfare and fortified settlements. In this way taniwha, while existing in metaphysical space, have not only historically shaped the characteristics and social dynamics of Māori communities, but they continue to do so today.

By negotiating light and shadow on Māori terms, Birch offers indigenous narratives through which to read Blackwater and Aramoana–Pathway to the Sea, but he does not attempt to re-locate or suggest that Hotere's work belongs purely to an ethnographic categorisation. It is because of Hotere that New Zealand art audiences, and increasingly international audiences too, now understand that artists of Māori descent can engage with global trends, movements and ideologies while still retaining aspects of their Māoritanga (indigeneity). Birch therefore positions these narratives not as restrictive measures, but as another layer of korero (storytelling) to add to the conversation.

Reuben Friend
Curator Māori and Pacific Art

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Israel Tangaroa Birch is of Ngāpuhi (Ngai Tawake) and Ngāti Kahungunu (Te Iwi o Rakaipaaka) descent and holds a degree in Visual Arts from the Eastern Institute of Technology, Napier and completed his Master of Māori Visual Arts through Te Pūtahi-ā-Toi School of Māori Visual Arts, Massey University, Palmerston North in 2010 where he currently lectures on Māori Visual Culture. Birch exhibited his Master's exhibition Pae Kura at the Hawke's Bay Museum & Art Gallery in 2006 and regularly exhibits nationally and abroad. He has won several awards including the Ngā Karahipi ā Te-Waka Toi Creative New Zealand Excellence in Māori Arts Award and was a finalist in the Norsewear Art Award in 2004, 2005 and was awarded the supreme prize in 2006. Birch is represented by Page Blackie Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand and Martin Browne Gallery, New South Wales, Australia.

⁶ Ibid.