

Shane Cotton: *The Hanging Sky*



Shane Cotton, *The Painted Bird*, 2010. Acrylic on linen. Woodward family collection. Photograph: Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu

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Curriculum Links

English: Listening, Reading, Viewing and Speaking

Social Science: Identity, Culture, and Organisation, Place and Environment, Continuity and Change

Visual Art: Communicating and Interpreting, Understanding the Arts in Context, Developing Practical Knowledge

NCEA: Demonstrate understanding of art works from a Māori and another cultural context using art terminology

About the artist

Shane Cotton is a New Zealand artist of Māori and European descent. His iwi are Ngā Puhi, Ngāti Rangī, Ngāti Hine and Te Uri Taniwha. His whakapapa ties him to the Northland region of Ohaeawai. His mother is of Scottish and English descent and his father is from Kawakawa in the far north. Born in Upper Hutt, he now lives with his family in Palmerston North.

He received a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Canterbury in Christchurch and until 2005 lectured in the Māori Visual Arts Programme at Massey University. His paintings have been exhibited extensively in New Zealand and overseas. In 2008 Cotton received an Arts Laureate Award from the New Zealand Arts Foundation and in 2012 was made an Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit for services to the visual arts.

About the exhibition – themes and processes

Since emerging from Canterbury School of Fine Art in the early 1990s, Shane Cotton has become one of Aotearoa's most esteemed painters. Using his dual Māori and Pākehā heritage as a starting point his early work explored ideas around the land and its histories, engaging with debates about identity, ownership and appropriation in post-colonial New Zealand. Frequently featuring sepia-toned landscapes stacked on museum-like shelves, these works were described by critics as contemporary history paintings.

The Hanging Sky, however, showcases some significant changes in Cotton's work since the mid-2000s. It sees the artist exploring diverse processes and techniques, from a series of painted baseball bats to a suite of large aquatint prints. Most importantly, it presents a shift in focus from the land to the sky, with Cotton creating a new kind of painted space that is grand, atmospheric and very much open to interpretation.

The journey begins with a number of large scale, blue-black skies, cloud forms skilfully airbrushed over a darkly primed canvas to create an illusionistic space. These brooding skies act as a place to hang motifs, images and texts, becoming what Cotton describes as 'surreal spaces'. Bird forms speed past rock faces, images of Toi Moko (tattooed heads) float in the air. We see spray painted biblical texts, words that drift in and out of English and te reo Māori. Forms and fragments from art's past are grafted together to make strange new totems.

Some of these paintings make reference to a story that Cotton describes as being about 'a Māori chief, a rock and a bird'. The narrative is part of the history around Ohaeawai and tells of a bird, Taiamai, who came to that place, perching on a rock where it was noticed and revered by the people there. The bird was transformed, its spirit melting into and fusing with the rock after a neighbouring rangitira tried to steal it, accidentally killing it in the process.

"I'm interested in ideas that come from the story. The idea of the transforming character, something bodily becoming something spiritual. The idea of a relationship to the environment and having a response to things 'natural', things 'in our place'. There are thousands of stories Māori people use to describe their places of origin. Having an interest in that story, in where I come from, really delivered these images."¹

The concept of moving between worlds flows through the exhibition and we see journeys between not only physical and spiritual dimensions but between Māori and Christian belief systems, between the worlds of past and present and the realms of popular culture, international art and Māori visual tradition. Cotton, a self-confessed 'magpie', borrows images from traditional and contemporary sources, making connections between different worlds and taking us on a journey through diverse cultural histories.

The artist in context

Shane Cotton is part of a tradition of contemporary Māori art beginning in the 1950s. At this time Māori artists began to experiment with the materials, styles and techniques of modern European art, exploring how Māori stories and identity could be expressed using this visual language. This first generation included artists like Paratene Matchitt, Cliff Whiting, Sandy Adsett, Ralph Hotere and Arnold Manaaki Wilson, who are now seen as leading Māori figures in the art world. Cotton represents images of Wilson's work in his large recent work *The Haymaker Series*.

He is one of a group of younger artists of dual Māori and Pākehā descent, including Peter Robinson, Lisa Reihana and Michael Parekowhai, who trained within a Western art school tradition and explore aspects of their bicultural heritage in their art. His work can be located in a number of other ways, existing within a legacy of New Zealand artists such as Colin McCahon who have used text in their artworks, or within an international conversation about appropriation in art. His recent works have employed surrealist approaches and have been discussed in connection with artists such as René Magritte.

Pre and post-visit activities

Birds feature in many Māori oral histories, sometimes as characters with the ability to travel back and forth between the world of the living and the spirit world. **Read** or **listen** to some of these stories and **paint** a picture to illustrate your favourite. Which characters will be in the picture? Where are they? What are they doing? What is the mood or atmosphere of the scene? How could you create that mood in your painting through the use of colour?

Cotton's interest in the story of Taiamai, in where he comes from, has influenced his work. You can read a version of this story at <http://thisistheplace.org.nz/>, an online living history project where people share stories and knowledge about places in Northland. **Collect** some stories about the place where you live by searching online or interviewing people from your family or community. Is the place where you live different to the place where you come from? Does your family have connections to other places in Aotearoa or overseas? What stories can you find out about those places to add to your collection? What are some of the ways you could **document** and **share** these stories through written, spoken or visual language?

Read 'The Ghosts of Birds' by Eliot Weinberger, a poem inspired by Cotton's paintings. **Write** your own poem or short story using imagery in the exhibition as a source of motivation.

Discuss your understanding of the word 'appropriation' and why Cotton might describe himself as a 'magpie'. Do you think there is a difference between appropriation and copying? What reasons might an artist have to use appropriated imagery in their work? **Visit** Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa to see some great examples of Māori modernist sculpture referenced in Cotton's paintings.

Language you may hear or use in our education programmes

Whakapapa – Genealogy

Manu – Bird

Toka – Rock

Kikorangi – Blue

Rangi – Sky

Ranginui – Atua of the sky

Appropriation – the use of images, motifs or ideas from another artist or culture

Transformation – the process of changing in structure or character

Surrealism – an art movement which began in the early 1920s. Surrealist artworks often feature unexpected juxtapositions, unlikely connections between disparate things.

Useful resources

Exhibition catalogue – *Shane Cotton: The Hanging Sky*. Including texts by Justin Paton, Eliot Wienberger Geraldine Kirrihi Barlow and Robert Leonard with 72 full-colour images.

Article – *Shane Cotton: Stamina, surprise and suspense*. B.170 Christchurch Art Gallery Bulletin, p.11.

Online interview – Shane Cotton discusses his recent work at his show *To and Fro* in London.

<http://www.rossirossi.com/contemporary/exhibitions/to.and.fro/artist-talk.3>

¹ Retrieved from <http://www.rossirossi.com/contemporary/exhibitions/to.and.fro/artist-talk.3> April 2013