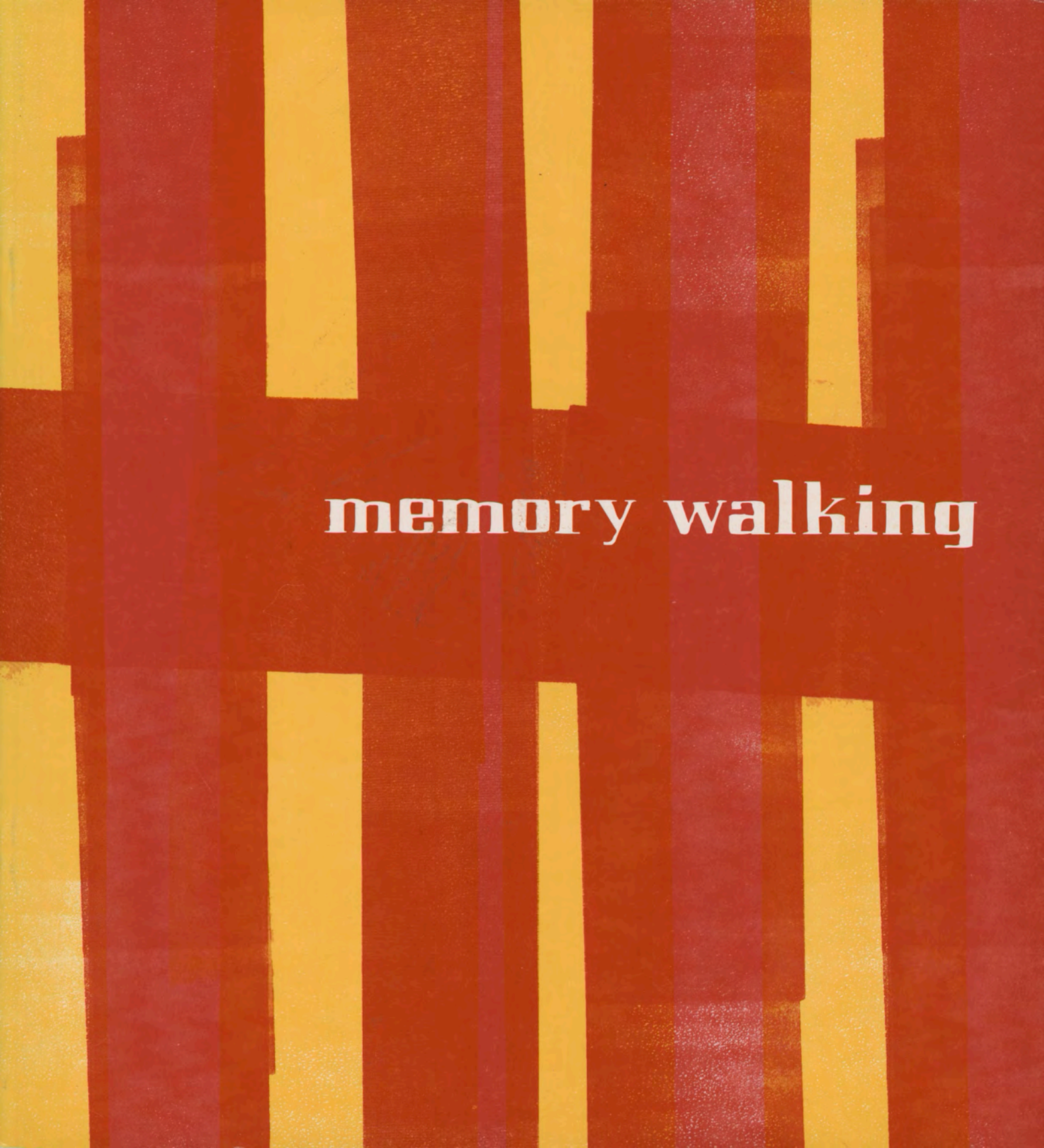




memory walking

memory walking

CURATED BY Roma Potiki

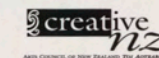
The City Gallery, Wellington is delighted to present *Memory Walking*, a significant exhibition of contemporary paintings, prints and installation work by eight women artists from around the world. The diversity of cultural perspectives represented in their works enrich and reward the viewer. A common thread among these very disparate images is the artists' use of personal memory. Telling stories from their own lives and those of their peoples, collectively they point to the importance of place and history in culture. For a New Zealand audience, the works included in *Memory Walking* open doors to new worlds of the imagination and new sites for cultural practice.

From an original idea by prominent New Zealand artist Robyn Kahukiwa, *Memory Walking* has been sensitively and poetically curated by Roma Potiki. The City Gallery acknowledges Roma's

DIRECTOR'S FOREWORD remarkable contribution to this project at all levels. We also acknowledge with gratitude the timely support and investment of Creative New Zealand Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa, without whose assistance this ambitious project could never have been realised. Thanks are due to the lenders who have allowed their works to travel to Wellington. And finally, we thank the artists—Lubaina Himid, Michi Itami, Robyn Kahukiwa, Jean LaMarr, Lily Laita, Debra Priestly, Maud Sulter, and Judy Watson—for their generosity in sharing the richness of their lives and histories with us, through these compelling works.

Paula Savage

City Gallery, Wellington, 1998
with the support of Creative New Zealand

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ARTS COUNCIL OF NEW ZEALAND TOI AOTEAROA



Michi Itami *Sadame* 1995
computer-generated four-colour lithograph
collection of the artist

memory walking

Roma Potiki

Our identity affects our perceptions of the world. Each of the eight artists in *Memory Walking* actively constructs a multilayered identity. Experiences of femaleness and cultural belonging are filtered through these identities, confirming an existence in the present.

Previous exchanges between Robyn Kahukiwa and the artists laid the basis for the cross-cultural communication that has culminated in *Memory Walking*. Kahukiwa had the initial idea for the exhibition. She had previously exhibited with most of these artists and wanted to expose their works collectively to a New Zealand audience. I was engaged to curate from my perspective as an indigenous woman. My approach has been to look for a flow of interconnecting narratives and concerns. I welcome the diversity and gendered view that characterises *Memory Walking*.

In looking at these disparate works I am struck by their commonalities. In different ways the artists traverse history. Whether they challenge the received knowledge of the past, or negotiate a position of reconciliation, all refer to their own cultural sites. These sites are not always geographically specific: they also include the conceptual bases that drive societal mores.

Each artist shows us a moment of recognition, a space where self or past events are exposed and laid open to new investigation.

Interconnections within *Memory Walking* include the polemic of international solidarity for indigenous peoples' rights and for the rights of women. The artists posit an exploration of identity as essential for survival. Identity is integral to their ability to move into a future which they take part in determining for themselves.

When I look at the work of **Michi Itami** (b.1938) I see a series of multiple conversations. These cross genders and cultures, presenting human landscapes of duality, where citizenship is neither simple nor certain. Itami is a printmaker as well as a multimedia and digital artist. Her works include computer-generated colour lithographs. She uses photographs left to her by her late father, Akira, telling the visually compelling story of a Japanese-American heritage that is her personal legacy.

Though both her parents were born in America, they and Itami were incarcerated during World War II in what was euphemistically called a 'relocation' camp —Manzanar, in California. Itami describes her image



Robyn Kahukiwa *Nga Tipuna ki Mua ko Tatau kei Muri (The Ancestors are in Front, We are Behind)* 1996
oil on canvas
courtesy of the artist and the Jonathan Smart Gallery, Christchurch

The Irony of Being American (1996) in this way:

'*The Irony* as it is nicknamed, includes three views of my father—one at sixteen years of age in Japanese dress, one at twenty-three in a double-breasted suit, and one at twenty-seven in his U.S. Army uniform—superimposed transparently over the background of Manzanar.¹

The original image of Manzanar was taken by Ansel Adams as a young photographer in the employ of the US Government. Adams was told to take photographs of the camp, but he was ordered to leave out the barbed wire and the guard towers. He took many of the photographs from the guard towers, hoping that intelligent people would ask from what vantage point these photographs were taken. Adams bequeathed the photographs to the Library of Congress, and they are part of the public domain.²

Itami bought the computer with which she makes her art from 'redress' money given to her by the US Government as compensation for being interned during the War. Just as women of 'colour' have used the camera to show the truth of their lives, so too Itami skilfully manipulates the technology of the 1990s to place her own experience in a wider context.

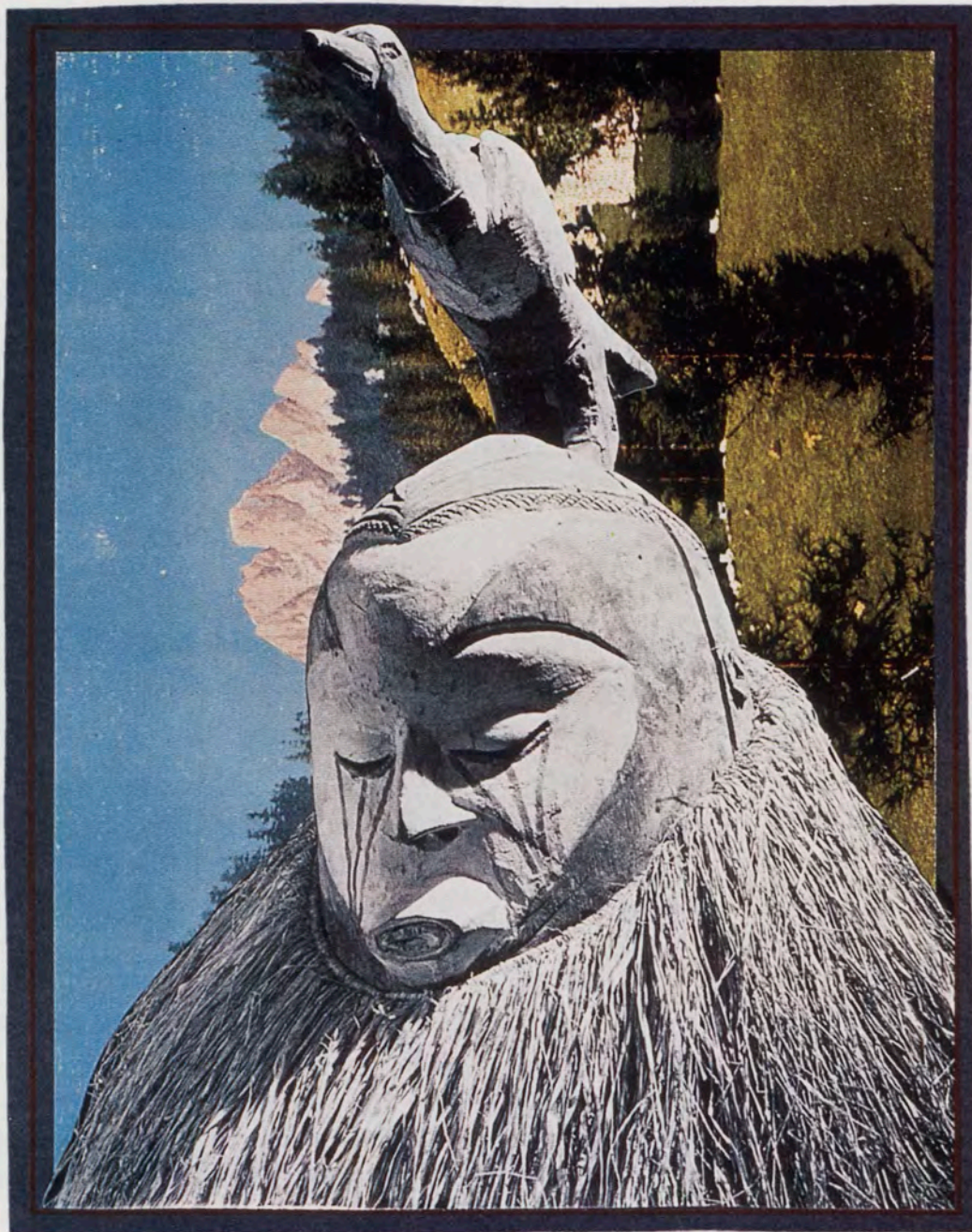
In Maori culture older women are often referred to as the 'memories' of the tribe, those who hold the history, genealogical information and knowledge of important events and learning. The title *Memory Walking* alludes to this and to the female interpretations of culture and colonisation that are at the core of this exhibition.

Identifying herself as a Maori artist, **Robyn Kahukiwa** (b.1940) has chosen to create her art primarily for Maori. Though Maori are her primary intended audience, I agree with Jonathan Mané-Wheoki when he states: 'No contemporary Maori artist's imagery is more publicly accessible or immediately familiar to New Zealanders than that of Robyn Kahukiwa.'³ Kahukiwa's international reputation grows steadily and includes showings of her work variously in the United States⁴ and the United Kingdom.⁵

Her focus spans a history that inhabits both mythological time and the closer histories that we have begun to document in Aotearoa. She is represented here by two major works: *Nga Tipuna Ki Mua, Ko Tatau Kei Muri—The Ancestors are in Front, We are Behind* (1996), and *Taniwha Wounded But Not Dead* (1990).

Wounded... formed part of the Haeata Collective's contribution to the *Mana Tiriti* exhibition at the City Gallery, Wellington in 1990. It places Maori women as central to the survival and resurgence of Maori culture. Here tino rangatiratanga or Maori self-determination, to have control over our own destiny, is aligned directly with the need for spiritual connection, nurture and physical action in the present.

In the elongated panel of *Nga Tipuna*, history is compressed into a virtual summation of Kahukiwa's concerns to date. We see a confident manipulation of her own iconography. Received histories are altered as she re-presents New Zealand history from a Maori woman's perspective. This includes the reinstating of Mana Wahine Maori and the position, roles and influence



Maud Sulter *Cinq* (from the series *Noir et Blanc I–V*) 1993
photographic print
courtesy of Rich Women of Zurich Ltd, London

that Maori women rightfully exert within their culture's leadership and practices. Critic Mark Amery noted of this piece: 'Throughout, the canvas is imbued with warm, earthy and fiery colours. Spirit is given contemporary presence.'⁶

The often predatory relationship of Western art to that of indigenous people has meant that frequently a limited range of contemporary artists who identify as indigenous or 'of colour' are promoted within mainstream galleries and institutions. An uncomfortable coexistence has been one of the legacies of a system that still largely refers to Western art for its standards of excellence.

Maud Sulter's photographic works place issues of cultural imperialism centre-stage and offer a new representation of black identity and femininity. Sulter's construction of a black, female presence in world culture reverberates like the crack of a sharp whip across the *Noir et Blanc I–V* and *Hélas L'Héroïne* series.⁷ Her startling images sparkle and brood. Like giant airships roving over the natural tourist destinations of a travel poster Europe, in the *Noir et Blanc* series the invisible angst suggested by the African masks is undercut by the seeming serenity of the landscape. A sense of contained anguish becomes an intellectual metaphor for the marginalisation of black people from European history.

I experience Sulter's works as a series of intense libations, paying homage to the impact of black people on civilisation from the earliest of times to the present. Sulter bears witness to the intelligence and contribution

that white society has largely ignored or rendered politely invisible.

A photographic artist, Sulter (b.1960) also curates, lectures and writes poetry. She first began exhibiting in 1984 and has developed an international reputation for her photographic prints. Since 1987 she has often exhibited with fellow artist Lubaina Himid. Earlier this year one of her works was displayed at Te Papa, the Museum of New Zealand, as part of the *Pictura Britannica* exhibition.

Paiute/Pit River Native American, **Jean LaMarr** (b.1945) is a prominent master printmaker, educationalist, curator, muralist and artist. LaMarr lives on tribal lands in Susanville near the California/Nevada border.

Here LaMarr exhibits two of the four paintings that are part of her installation *Native People, Sacred Lands* (1994). The works feature sacred sites and ceremonies, exploring what they mean to Native American people and their cultural well-being. The areas that LaMarr refers to in California and the Great Basin are being destroyed by big business, mismanaged tourism and lack of governmental protection for the environment.

Instead of traditional quilting or beading, *Native People, Sacred Lands* uses acrylic paint and handmade paper on canvas, to represent her people's stories. Her works are both a response to the destructive technologies often foisted on Native Americans and an honouring of the traditions of her ancestors. LaMarr's work reflects Native American wisdom and confirms the values of her own people.



Jean LaMarr *Cortez Mountains* (from the installation *Native People, Sacred Lands*) 1994
acrylic paint, handmade paper, chine collé, screenprint, handstitching, canvas
collection of the artist



Debra Priestly *Looking Memory Glass* 1998
glass, birch, brass, acrylic, semi-precious stones, saltwater pearls
collection of the artist

LaMarr is a nationally recognised community-arts activist and exhibits widely both in the United States and internationally. For part of her year she teaches printmaking at the American Indian Art Institute in Santa Fé; she then returns home to work at the Native American Graphic Workshop in Susanville, and on other community-based projects.

Her work often uses humour and also acts as a mirror to reflect contemporary reality for Native American people. She counters negative stereotypes about Native American people and renders an unromanticised response to mainstream America's popular representations of Native Americans as 'noble chief' or the 'available squaw'. LaMarr is one of the most influential Native American artists working today.

The encounter offered by *Memory Walking* is one of multilayered complexity. Images of place, interpretations of genealogy, the subversion of previous narratives, and affirmations of culture and sex mutually inform one another. In the *Caddisworm Chronicles #2* (1995) and *#3* (1996), **Debra Priestly** (b.1961) composes her paintings on birch. They appear as a series of associated fragments mixing together to tell stories of past and present. In her intricate creations, the past metamorphoses to show her connection to a remembered childhood. Associations to familiar objects from the past reveal themselves in an almost dreamlike reality that gives glimpses of the artist's sense of self.

Priestly states: '*Caddisworm Chronicles #2 & #3* come from a recent series by the same name. *Caddisworm Chronicles* draws an analogy between a caddisworm

(a larva of a caddisfly that lives in and carries around a silken case covered with matter) and the accumulation of things both physical and mental, that occurs during one's lifetime.'⁸ Leslie King Hammond likewise comments: 'These mixed media configurations recall the tightly contained box paintings of Joseph Cornell, the Kongo Nkisi, Luba memory boards used in sacred African religious belief systems.'⁹

In between travelling and teaching¹⁰ Priestly has made the new wall-mounted installation *Looking Memory Glass* (1998) for *Memory Walking*. As an African-American living in New York, Priestly lives a life where a diversity of cultural expressions can flourish. Her exquisite new work incorporates glass mason jars, birch, brass, acrylic, semi-precious stones and saltwater pearls. She comments: 'For so many years, my work has dealt with memory and ancestry. And, in 1989 during a visit to Aotearoa, I was moved and inspired by Maori traditions regarding the preservation of memory and the family tree. *Looking Memory Glass* speaks particularly to memories and ancestral knowledge that we keep alive through common rituals and objects, the power of association and the storytelling tradition.'¹¹

In *Memory Walking* we experience a diversity of approaches to art-making within an aesthetic of practice that includes the reclamation of black achievement and creativity. The inventiveness of **Lubaina Himid's** post-colonial desires in *Architects/Models/Plans* (1997) draws us into a world of vivacity and power. Here, women make choices about the design and function of the environments we live in. The artist asks:



Lubaina Himid *Architect 2A* 1997
acrylic on canvas
courtesy of Rich Women of Zurich Ltd, London

What shape is a woman's space

Is the space high rise

Are the walls curved

Is the garden important

Is the exterior painted

*How important is light...*¹²

Space is mapped out and reintegrated by matriarchs of form, colour and thought. Like magicians, the architects conjure new worlds. These traverse national boundaries and combine a sense of history with the momentum of the present. Born in Zanzibar in 1954, Himid moved to London as a small child. Her work is widely exhibited in the United Kingdom, with exhibitions also appearing in Europe and the United States. She holds the position of Reader in Contemporary Art at the University of Central Lancashire.

While *Memory Walking* explores the individual practice of each artist, the works are transmitted within a cultural context that is subjectively interpreted. In **Lily Aitui Laita's** work *incognegro* (1997), the artist questions perceptions of 'tradition' and belonging. Laita layers paint, emotion and words. Her works share a multiplicity of meaning. Laita's *incognegro* pulses and swirls almost as though the past had risen from the ocean and navigated through cross-currents into a contemporary reality.

Ancestral figures are ceremonially seated, preparing the ava¹³ that symbolises connections to both land and to woman's spirituality and power. The words 'tuu i ai ni vai' on her painting refer to the act of adding water

to the ava, which also becomes a symbolic reference to questions of identity. Can culture be watered down, is it an instant fix, what do we mean by purity, who decides who has worth and who will be 'other'? Of Samoan, Maori and English ancestry, Lily Aitui Laita (b.1969) is part of a new generation of artists who continue the important work of questioning how cultural space is constructed and what traditions will evolve from that place. The spirit of intuitive knowledge and femaleness pervasive in her works imparts a sense of awareness. Her strong manipulation of colour, as though it were form, anchors the works against the black builders' paper on which they are painted. Laita has taken part in numerous exhibitions that have been important in bringing the work of Pacific artists to mainstream attention.¹⁴

Though quite different in form, the content of **Judy Watson's** paintings have much in common with both Robyn Kahukiwa and the installation work of fellow Maori artist Maureen Lander. All share a deep sense of reverence for land and concern with issues of identity.

Watson (b.1959) unearths an Australian past, a past covered by successive waves of violence against, and repression of, Aboriginal people. In her visceral landscapes, such as *niagara* (1994), bones and skull-like imprints leave their trace. Watson states of *niagara*: 'This work was begun during an artists' camp on the edge of the western desert in WA above Kalgoorlie at a place called Niagara Dam... I made this work near a dry creek bed and scattered some of the gravel from here into the pigment and glue I had laid in stripes across



Judy Watson *niagara* 1994
puffball dye, pigment, ink, earth, oil pastel and acrylic on canvas
collection of Artbank (Commonwealth of Australia)

the canvas imitating the sweep of the line of the cliffs surrounding me. Later in my studio in Sydney, I played with the image of the skull-like shape and overlaid this across the piece. Up within the cliffs of the country were many caves, some filled with very fine white powder from the sandstone and the tracks, bones and dung of a range of animals... Always in this country I felt a strong Aboriginal presence (indicated physically by scar trees and other objects) as well as the layering of the goldfields experience upon the site ...¹⁵

Watson's paintings create a sense of time and timelessness. The canvases appear like skin receiving water. Like transcendent episodes, each one is infused with the precious touch of memory. Her fluid, highly coloured pigmentations spread out to record a cartography that presses on the landscape like footprints on earth.

Watson's work has achieved international recognition. She was Moët et Chandon Fellow in 1995, an award that allowed her to work for a year in France. In the 1997 Venice Biennale, she was one of three Aboriginal women artists representing Australia in the exhibition *Fluent*. She has exhibited several times in New Zealand and was artist in residence at the University of Canterbury earlier this year.

Ben Okri writes that 'Stories are either dangerous or liberating because they are a kind of destiny.'¹⁶ The works in *Memory Walking* can be viewed as passages through a reservoir of stories and transitions. The 'destiny' that is proposed here is an exploration of cultures. Within that mapping of shared identities, we experience the intensity of distinctive individual concerns.

- 1 Michi Itami, 'The Irony of Being American', in *Voices of Colour*, ed Phoebe Farris-Du Fresne, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1997.
- 2 John Armor and Peter Wright, *Manzanar*, commentary by John Hersey, photographs by Ansel Adams, New York: Random House, 1988.
- 3 Jonathan Mané-Wheoki, 'My Ancestors Are With Me Always', *Art New Zealand*, no. 75, Winter 1995, p.61.
- 4 *Te Waka Toi* group exhibition of contemporary Maori artists, Museum of Man, San Diego then other venues in the US; *Maori Born*, a solo show at Soho 20, New York, 1997.
- 5 *Columbus Drowning*—indigenous women artists' international exhibition at Rochdale Arts Gallery, Lancashire, England 1992; *Photogenetic—Reviewing the Lens of History*, touring exhibition, UK 1995 (*Whiteout* series, *Unidentified Maori Women* 5&6).
- 6 Mark Amery, exhibition review (Personal Messages of New Paintings by Robyn Kahukiwa at Bowen Galleries and Bam Bookshop, Wellington, 1996), *Sunday Star-Times*, 10 November, 1996.
- 7 Both series formed part of the *Syracas* exhibition, Wrexham Library Art Centre, Clwyd, Wales, 1994—then touring various sites in Europe. The photographs of August Sander and writings of Primo Levi were crucial to the development of the works.
- 8 From her artist's statement for *Memory Walking*, City Gallery, Wellington, 1998.
- 9 Leslie King Hammond, 'Caddisworm Chronicles', in the publication for the opening at the June Kelly Gallery, New York, 1996.
- 10 Priestly teaches at both the School of Art, The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art; and the Visual Arts Department, Sarah Lawrence College (both in New York).
- 11 From her artist's statement for *Memory Walking*, City Gallery, Wellington, 1998.
- 12 Part of a text by Lubaina Himid written to accompany *Architects/Models/Plans*, 1997.
- 13 A traditional ceremonial drink.
- 14 *Bottled Ocean* (1994) Auckland City Art Gallery and national tour; *WOMAD Festival* (1997) Auckland; *FireWorks* (1998) Auckland.
- 15 Judy Watson, correspondence with the City Gallery, Wellington, 1998.
- 16 Ben Okri, 'The Joys of Storytelling', in *Birds of Heaven*, London: Phoenix Books, 1996.



Lily Aitui Laita *incognegro* 1997
acrylic and oilstick on builders' paper
courtesy of Giles Peterson, Pacific Age Art, Auckland

the Artists

Lubaina Himid was born in Zanzibar in 1954, and moved to London as a child. She has an MA in Cultural History, Royal College of Art (1984) and has curated exhibitions of other black artists. Himid's paintings have a very personal take on history and experience. Currently Reader in Contemporary Art at the University of Central Lancashire, she lives in Preston, England.

Michi Itami was born in 1938 and describes herself as a Japanese American. Her work deals with the conflicts arising from existing in dual cultures. Her works are personal and poignant, often using photographs of three generations of her family, to make a broad social comment. To create her images, Itami combines printmaking techniques with computer technology. She is Associate Professor of Art at the City College of New York, where she lives.

Robyn Kahukiwa (Ngati Porou, Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti, Ngati Hau, Ngati Konohi, Te Whanau-a-Ruataupare) was born in 1940 and began painting in 1968. In her art she seeks to reclaim and reaffirm Maori rights to self-determination. Her subject matter is drawn from her belief that women, land and ancestry are integral to the status, well being and spirit of Maori people. Kahukiwa is well-known throughout New Zealand for her large canvases, poster and book commissions. She lives and works in Otaki.

Lily Aitui Laita was born in Auckland in 1969. She is of Samoan, English and Maori ancestry and her work navigates between cultures and generations. She often paints with her hands on black builders' paper to make energetic, monumental works that are full of vigour and colour. Laita has worked as a teacher for several years, and is currently employed as a painting lecturer at the Whanganui Polytechnic. She lives in Wanganui.

Jean LaMarr was born in 1945 and works as a master printmaker, painter and muralist. She creates images of contemporary Native American life in the United States, and reflects the ongoing changes faced by her people. In particular, her work examines the impact of developments, such as nuclear facilities, on religious sites. Jean LaMarr lives on a Native American reservation in Susanville, California.

Debra Priestly was born in 1961 and identifies herself primarily as an African-American. Her work is grounded in the contemporary world, using objects and symbols that are fragments of a remembered past to memorialise rituals and events. Priestly's paintings and installation pieces comment on the power of association and storytelling traditions which link the past, present and future. She lives and works in New York City.

Maud Sulter was born in Glasgow in 1960 of Scots and Ghanaian descent. Her MA is in Photographic Studies. Eminent both as an artist and a writer, Sulter's work often has a distinct narrative and a sense of otherworldliness. Her complex photographic works present issues of marginalisation in British society, drawing on the history of black women and black female artists. She lives in Preston, England.

Judy Watson was born in Mundubbera, Queensland in 1959. She is a member of the Waanyi language group in North-West Queensland. She received the Moët et Chandon fellowship in 1995, and in 1997 with Emily Kame Kngwarreye and Yvonne Koolmatrie, represented Australia at the Venice Biennale in the exhibition *Fluent*. Her works reveal concealed histories, drawing on memory. For half the year she is a lecturer in painting in the Fine Arts Department of the Northern Territory University in Darwin, Australia.

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Te Whare Toi