## Review article

Double Vision: Art Histories and Colonial Histories in the Pacific.

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Until the late 1960s something called 'Maori art' was assumed by many non-Maori New Zealanders to be 'in decline'. The story went something like this: when Maori saw the work of Cook's artists in 1769 they were exposed for the first time to European drawing, with its naturalistic codified styles, landscapes, perspective, realist scientific detail and cultural assumptions. Such 'exposure' occured at about the same time as other so-called 'fatal impacts': missionaries, exotic plants, diseases, alcohol, firearms and much else. Note, this is me, the adult, remembering my own education. At that time, the school-teacherly, parental, editorialising voices didn't use these words. More likely as children on school trips, and via instructional newsreels with softened, sad-reverent inflection of the voice reserved for the damaged and the 'handicapped', we were taught to 'see' a 'dying art' (albeit an awesome and fascinating one of which 'all New Zealanders can feel proud') preserved in a museum.

The idea is an example of a cultural myth imposed by the dominant on colonised groups: less a deliberate falsehood than the reflection of Pakeha cultural assumptions, misunderstandings, naivete and arrogance. Communications springing from those assumptions were repeated so frequently, and so seldom contested, that they came to be thought 'natural'. Like many such myths, this one also kept mainstream Pakeha in an ignorance that was useful to Maori groups and, to some degree, continues to be so. Ignorance of whare whakairo (the values behind images) protects sensitive private concerns, history, memories and issues.

Two hundred or so years after Cook, New Zealand's tiny art world erupted with arguments about coloniser appropriation of Maori art, and, later, talk of 'de-colonisation', 'authenticity' and 'indigenisation'. 'Maori art' itself emerged as something of a disputed category. It took another quarter century before Pakeha art historians dared write about the transformations wrought on European art traditions by

exposure to things Maori (a task not yet fully engaged). Or the fact that Maori peoples had been using European technologies to communicate politically assertive and culturally affirming messages under the uncomprehending noses of non-Maori (was this 'appropriation' too?) and that all along Maori had been 'looking back', so to speak, and very probably laughing.¹ In attending to this reverse scrutiny, the peculiarly Anglo-European and academic concept of 'the gaze', together with notions of 'who' is doing the looking and 'how', and of 'what' they might think they are seeing, are undergoing sea changes. We have a long way to go.

This ambitious book by Australian editors announces a 'new project': 're-imag[ining] art and culture in the Pacific, particularly Australia ...'. Contributors are drawn principally from traditional academic disciplines: history, art history, English literature, anthropology. Although work relevant to the undertaking has been produced in interdisciplinary fields like cultural studies, new media theory, feminist and queer and postcolonial studies, and Maori fine arts, little of that appears here. These debates may also be approached from the emerging interdisciplinary field of 'visual cultural studies'.

Viewed deconstructively, the main outcome of *Double Vision* is perhaps to illustrate how far nine (presumably) pale male and three pale female academics (eight of the eleven academics are male), two Aboriginal/Koori identified and Maori identified male artists, have travelled in trying to understand their own history, art and actions. In the process the contributors engage with and generate ideas about colonialism, historical record keeping, interpretation, language, authenticity, translation, incommensurability, multiculturalism, and 'primitivism and modernity' cogent to 'Antipodean postmodernism'; that is to say, in relation to the ideological and political grounds of twentieth century art, history and cultural writing.<sup>2,3</sup>

The book has some obvious limitations, some of which are contained in the title 'Double Vision'.

Question: When do I have double vision?

Answer 1: When I hit my head hard or am so tired that my eyes won't focus 'normally' and I see two unsynchronised moving fields, albeit 'of-the-same-thing';

Answer 2: when I try to perform certain interrogative, often contractualbureaucratic, tasks such as 'presenting both sides of an argument' or 'representing a fair and balanced set of viewpoints';

Answer 3: When I am presented with two or more images simultaneously on a hi-tech screen.

I'm sure you can imagine other scenarios. Most involve headaches. In each case, epistemological tradition and visual-cultural communicative habit requires me to selectively delimit, stabilise, collect and create (usually 'opposite') 'sides' or poles of some 'image/ imaginary' or 'issue'. In order to communicate, debate, enjoy or decide - that is so 'we' can all play - most often collective univocal 'sides' have to be 'picked up', much after the fashion and the rhythms of schoolyard games such as 'oranges and lemons', 'natives and settlers', 'Antipodean and European', 'self and other', 'colonial and indigenous', 'Maori and Pakeha', or 'cops and robbers'. This fine, endlessly compromised balancing act can only satisfy those who feel safe in a world limited by bounded Modernist possibilities and identities. I don't. Those who find ideas like liminality, the performative, normativity, multivocality, boundary-crossing, transgression, polymorphous and perverse pleasures, infinite hermeneutic open endedness and so on threatening, incomprehensible, wanky or impractical, had best stop reading now.

For me, none of the first set of ideas adequately allows for or conveys the political, pleasurable, painful and dangerous complexities of living and meaning that are popularly (still) supposed to reside 'in' bodies and brains, but endlessly overflow and defy their categories. Each inhibits its user should she try to explain the traditional 'what', 'how', and 'why' by beginning with why they are all contingent cultural inventions and impositions, implicated in and for governing selves and populations. Many people just roll their eyes and find another playmate.

To put it simply, how can there be a 'double vision' – two fields only – in the whole of the vast geographic spatial and intellectual cultural spectra of territories and realms inadequately named 'Pacific colonial art and art history'? To take one instance and a single dimension of many millions possible, in Western Australia alone at the time of the invasion there were over three hundred distinct and unique Aboriginal languages (that is to say, three hundred that European philologists and anthropologists managed to count and map). To take a more New Zild approach, what is this thing called 'Maori and European'? The ideas are insulting, simple minded, trippy,

impoverishing, and normalising. They stink of bureaucratic and governmental imperatives, interpersonal insults, popular and policy nightmares. This is especially so for peoples of the tangata whenua whose inventions and frames they are not. To take a related example just emerging into public consciousness, if it is mostly young people who are identifying as Maori for the purposes of censuses and surveys, what does this do to the statistics and thus to the efficacy of 'closing-the-gaps'-style policy-making? Given the above problem of 'sidedness', the relative absence of indigenous-identified writers in this collection has got to be a major limitation and a problem to which I return.

Noticeably absent from the book is a tradition of writing within postmodern visual studies that tries to tackle a metaproblem – the largely unexamined ascendancy of visual epistemologies, orocularity, within Modernity, which Foucault called 'the positive unconscious of vision'. Addressing this might have assisted the discussion. For example, there has been some challenging work done on the how certain 'types' of racialised, gendered and classed bodies became solidified within scopic regimes and technologies, from painting to photography, in the nineteenth and the start of the twentieth centuries. This is an imperialist visual episteme which Timothy Mitchell named 'exhibitionary order'.

Double Vision: Art Histories and Colonial Histories in the Pacific has the hallmarks of a compilation drawn from a conference, this one (c. 1996) in Canberra to honour anthropologist, Bernard Smith. Much of the language and often arcane references tend to assume a specialist reader. Postscript writer, Peter Brunt, labours to pull together themes, commonalities and a few schisms in offerings that span extraordinarily unlike disciplinary perspectives, theoretical styles, diverse historical cultural and geographic locations and subjects, ranging from the domination of Sydney's settler architecture by an ex-convict governor (Macquarie), to aesthetics and ornithology among the Abelam of Papua New Guinea, to 1980s Australian feminist art. The editors acknowledge:

Confronted by rich colonial art traditions in the region, by the autonomy and power of indigenous cultural expressions, and by a complex pattern of connection and non-connection between these European and indigenous visions, we struggle to find an interpretative frame that makes sense of these histories, in and for the present.

Island groups – Juan Fernandez, Hawaii, New Caledonia, Nuie, the Solomons – form a kind of gestaltic 'South Seas' organising principle for writers who mostly hail from the élite white groups of the major (post)colonial powers in the region, Australia and New Zealand. In this context, the appearance of ideas like 'Micronesia' and 'the Antipodes' as descriptive-analytic concepts seemed bizarre, marking for me problems of habit and articulation that re-inscribe what one author calls 'the closeness and permanence of the coloniser [against] the silent still bush ... and the loud and unreasonable babble of the wild ... inhabitants'. Diane Losche's more modest and formulaic aim of 'address[ing] the philosophical and methodological problems involved in discussing particular issues of representation and cultural difference [in indigenous and coloniser cross-cultural communications]', felt more honest and more useful.

The unevenness of the papers, and especially where they conflict without cross-referencing or editorial comment, suggests that not only did no greatly effective exchange occur between authors, but also attention to the contradictions and breaks could identify a rich source of (unconscious) stress points and faultlines in the development of non-indigenous 'counter-colonial imaginings'. An example is Joan Kerr's detailed discussion of examples of 'quotation' and 'reappropriation' of colonial and aboriginal images in 1980s and 90s Australian art, which lacks any reference to prior art world debates. The result is that to a non-specialist it is unclear what Joan means by 'appropriation', 'postmodern' or 'neo-colonialism' in the first place. Are we all expected to have read these arguments? Another major problem for this compilation, noted by Kerr in relation to 1980s Australian feminist art (but not taken up by the editors or by any other author), is the virtual obliteration of gender in these accounts. An obvious example is the unconsciously gendered reading of the picture of the Kanak woman on pages 75 and 75, as being 'in a vigorous but oddly defensive pose, perhaps cowering from the warrior'. To me she might be performing a haka or a martial arts stance. It is hard to imagine many New Zealand feminists reading such a forceful image in such an ambivalent way. Tellingly, in this book dominated by white men, there is almost no personal reflexive writing except, notably, by the two non-white artists, for whom family genealogy is relevant, if not their 'masculine' inheritances.

That said, the book contains some impressive scholarship,

exacting historical details, examples and ideas that mark some outposts of anti-colonial thought in the field of art and literary history. Several chapters reward second readings, notably those by Lamb and McLean, and Peter Brunt's 'Afterword'. For New Zealand readers, Leonard Bell's thoughtful multiple re-readings of the work of colonial artist, C.F. Goldie, is a valuable contribution. A couple of chapters annoyed me, notably those by Douglas and Losche, for reasons it might be helpful to contemplate.

To link the interpretation of a work of art, a novel, a photograph, a map, a treaty, etc., to the conditions of its creation (physical, sociopolitical, economic, technological) and thereby to the mental and ideological conditions governing the conceptions and understandings of authors, subjects and readers, has been – and for many still is – the leading critical method in humanities and social sciences since the late 1960s. Drawing on radical traditions like socialism, the avant garde, existentialism, utopian thought and alternative histories of science and technology, scholars have generated detailed critical readings. Recuperation and construction of alternative histories from personal materials and ephemera as 'traces of resistance' among conquered and disadvantaged groups was argued to be an historically valuable means of providing alternatives and hints against which to read élite and dominant group materials. In their light, industrial capitalism and scientific epistemology and knowledges emerge as overwhelmingly 'ideological' (false and distorted). These were the primary methods used to 'reveal' the operations of capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism and so forth.

Immediately I identify two simple and related problems. Through the inevitable translation processes, the views of all of the above groupings and critiques ultimately become derivative of the points of view of colonisers, owners, masters, patriarchs, captors. For instance, even if a member of an oppressed group gets to speak they have to be translated for and by those who are the judges, consumers, monolinguistic, etc. Second, if any view is 'ideological', then who has the 'accurate' picture and how will we know when we see it? The critical art historian, however sympathetic, who tries to recuperate the experiences of groups depicted in coloniser art and texts but silenced within mainstream history, needs to explicitly discuss issues of exactly how and through what processes they claim to present readings 'against the grain' of dominant ideologies.

The aim of this book is allegedly to locate 'marks, imprints, traces, or countersigns of a native or subaltern 'agency', 'action', 'presence', and desire ... [but, more likely] the equivocations and contradictions of colonial utopia and the artistic imagination of ... settler culture ...'. It is questionable as to whether in seriously monocultural, classed and gendered settings, such as academic conferences, professional books, museums, universities, courtroom hearings, official educational curricula, subaltern and working class and female peoples - in this case, members of indigenous cultures during the time of colonisation, and convicts at the time of their confinement - can ever have 'authentic voices' or 'fair hearings'. If 'they' can be said to have a voice or to be heard, in what senses and circumstances can that which is represented escape being an instance of 'high cultural' filtering and seizure by 'us' of 'them'? Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argued convincingly in 1988 (and before her, Roland Barthes and numerous feminists since the 1970s), that the answer must favour the negative.8 But these sorts of authors don't get a look in in this book.

I think this is what Bob Jahnke is objecting to in *Double Vision*, for instance, when he rejects accusations of biological essentialism made by 'certain Pakeha academics' about 'Maori art' and artists. He sees their's as an attempt to perpetuate (to paraphrase) a remote, intellectualised imperialist 'essential white doctrine as the sole criterion for cultural enlightenment'. Such a 'single national voice' can neither accurately represent, nor reasonably condemn, Maori artists trying to protect their rights to control the customary images and motifs inherited from rich, polyvocal histories, and whose cultural significance is central in their negotiations of the liminal spaces of identity and mana in a thoroughly unequal contemporary situation 'beyond the *pae*'. At stake is no more nor less than Maori peoples' right to cultural self determination.

A good deal of contemporary cultural studies would indeed situate narratives that employ unified voices, paradigmatic clarity, definitive translations, secure knowledge and authoritative styles as essentialist, elitist and usually reactionary. The partiality and unreflexive style of much of the criticism since the 1960s, referred to above, its reliance on reading and writing, its elevation of 'academic' authority (with all its predominantly masculinist, white and class-based values) and its unexamined uses of tropes such as 'ideology', 'melancholy', 'cause' and 'vision', do yield partial, ambivalent and unresolvable arguments

and histories. Too frequently they end up reinscribing and celebrating the very things they are supposed to be problematising. Seen from different cultural experiences a book like this slides readily into an evocation and valorisation of bourgeois and coloniser white male 'genius', 'enlightenment', 'progress', 'causality', cumulative real history and a nostalgia for a bucolic period preceding modernity, while simultaneously attempting to un-make such notions.

The aim of Double Vision: Art Histories and Colonial Histories in the Pacific claims to be something different. The editors explain 'double vision' as having the following dimensions: locatedness in which significant sites, events and artistry are not parallel, and the need to keep both the profound differences between European and indigenous cultures and the need to write the complexities between them in view. The book claims a reorientation of the disciplines it draws on, which are themselves multiple. The history of visual culture is not clear, linear or cumulative. Thomas and Brunt begin and end the book saying that the writers try not to caricature, collectivise or supersede. Rather the effort is to explore a paradoxical condition of connectedness and distinctiveness that characterises the art, culture and social imaginings of the colonial periods and peoples engaged (c. late seventeenth and nineteenth centuries) as well as the disciplines that have attempted to write their history. Heightened attention is paid to the rational as involving profound tensions in European modernist thought, such as the relationship between image and history (the first conceptualised as 'corrupt'), self and other, oral and visual, fantasy and reality, fantastical utopia and sober empiricism. These objectives set out at the beginning are to be laid alongside the alternative knowledges, realities, art and histories of the many never-fully-colonised peoples of the South Pacific. There is a concerted effort to show how the first of the two strands. coloniser/colonised, are in themselves multi-vocal and variable matters of interpretation and interpellation, never simply a matter of action and counter-action. They relate on orthogonal planes.

A favorite was Ian McLean's chapter in which he explores the flavours of nostalgia from the early colonial period which, in these days of satellite communications are scarcely recognised any more as a cultural-artistic-emotional psychic backdrop for native-born tau iwi New Zealanders, and Australians. Another is Leonard Bell's wonderfully subtle and amusing reading of C.F. Goldie, that cuts through the posturing and the assumptions of those who for many

years, and maybe too quickly, dismissed Goldie as a simple minded, exploitative colonial artist. It is not that Bell seeks to recuperate Goldie: more that he explores the many alternative readings available to postcolonial eyes. Art history happens.

The book is unbalanced between Australian authors and those from other Pacific countries. For me it seriously over-represents colonisers in ways that over determine the partial and the visual of the English language élite and non-indigenous art historians, and understates the viewpoints of the colonised. One unfortunate outcome is an over concentration on the histories around the periods of 'fatal impact' matched by a consequent failure to take sufficient note of how these issues intersect with today's debates. Issues important in New Zealand art for the past twenty-five years are overlooked. Lots of whites know that it is not helpful to see 'Maori', 'Pakeha' settler or Aboriginal, etc., as monolithic groups.9 The issue of art appropriation has been longstanding, dating from the earliest colonial period when Pakeha both expropriated Maori taonga and saw 'Maori art' as confined to the past, the contemporary forms being read, as we have seen, as symptomatic of a dying form, products of a 'dying race', as part of a failure to recognise the adaptive and political possibilities for Maori in the appropriation of European styles, techniques, and technologies. The issue of appropriation involves morality and this is under-addressed. While both groups, Maori and Pakeha, can appropriate the others' art (techniques, aesthetics etc.) the relationship that exists between Maori and Pakeha-authored art is different to the Pakeha's relationship with Maori-authored art.

I wonder what could have been achieved if most of the authors had been members of colonised groups in the many Pacific islands nations whose colonial art history is the major subject of the book. There is a depressing symmetry in the origins of the authors. It might seem an altogether fine endeavour to whites to try and 'rehabilitate' the traces of indigenous agency in drawings and writing by colonial artists, but a situation in which colonisers speak almost exclusively to colonisers tends to produce an echo-chamber effect. How about these allegedly 'lost' histories of what native peoples saw or the very present examples of how they depict it in art, for instance? Is indigenous agency and resistance really so 'lost'? The evidence of oral traditions in New Zealand in relation to the theft of Maori land and taonga, the evidence of carved lintels and art, and in Australia the memories among the

living of the hunting down of aboriginal people for sport, for revenge and for 'science', suggests otherwise. And, what is 'rehabilitation' in this context? Rehabilitation to what and for whom? To me it smacks of iustifications for punishment and imprisonment. I suspect that more non-Maori are starting to recognise what many Maori have felt for some time, that 'biculturalism' and 'free speech' (read legally permitted English) are on the Pakeha front burner partly because they perpetuate the exclusion and silencing of multiple, semi-comprehended, 'aggressive' and 'unreasonable' Maori voices. It is easier to put Mike Smith in prison for wielding a chainsaw against an Auckland landmark. and to dismiss him in public as a disaffected 'Maori radical' - kin to Tamaiti and his 'like' - than it is to understand the intricate tribal histories that led Smith and Tamaiti, and Dame Whina Cooper and so many more, to make the gestures they do. In Australia this is a huge issue since official 'multiculturalism' represents further layers of exclusion, murder and distancing of Aboriginal voices.

In pre-European times, portraiture as mimesis (conventionally understood as copying or imitating a real model) was nonexistent since Maori art in those days was primarily conceptual and not figurative (illustrative or naturalistic). Once Europeans arrived Maori artists quickly included non-traditional aspects and techniques such as figurative depictions, paint and European symbols around carvings, used nails and steel chisels, wool instead of feathers in cloaks, English lettering and so on. Instead of seeing this as an assured creative adaptation, art historians and social studies teachers invented the phrase 'traditional Maori art': an imagined form that could then be seen as becoming 'debased'. Such 'incursions' were frequently seen as mimicry and as degrading of a 'pure' cultural form. As Rangihiroa Panoho has noted, colonialism often takes the form of nostalgia and of the perception of 'tribal culture' as a passive presence. 10 Mimicry is a complex idea. What to colonial eyes may seem like an 'inferior' form, to the eyes of indigenous artists or culturally savvy viewers may be parody, mockery or subtle and inspirational politics.<sup>11</sup>

There is a whole under-exposed history of innovative and aggressive Maori adaptations of Pakeha forms, design technology and materials, particularly from the nineteenth century ... [which] points to the ability of Maori culture over time to embrace even the most radical innovations and make them its own. <sup>12</sup>

That Maori have appropriated European styles, techniques and technologies has probably generated a lot less controversy than when the reverse has happened, for example, in the best known cases, when Gordon Walters used koru forms, or when Colin McCahon (re)appropriated the word as image as in 'Tohu' and 'Tuhoe'. Such debates at first tended to draw attention yet again towards Pakeha artists and away from contemporary Maori artists, 13 some of whom use ancient Maori symbols and modern Pakeha symbols in innovative ways. Since the 1990s Maori art has become increasingly fashionable, and with that fashion something of a much needed revolution in awareness is gradually occurring among white scholars. In some ways this is a mixed blessing, good for Maori knowledge, ownership, self esteem and pride, it means more exposure, commissions and opportunities for Maori artists, yet, as commercial 'hot property', Maori contemporary art is often still often subjected to the definitions and interventions of outsiders. An example being when European art historians become involved with questions of 'authenticity v innovation' and 'good v bad' Maori art, or when dealers exhibit and set prices. Some art historians (and possibly the odd Maori anthropologist) seem to have an obsession with miscegenation and a fear of 'hybridity', identified and discussed by Robert Young as typically a white colonial fear. 14

The unfortunate fact is that the descendants of the colonised and subordinated groups under scrutiny mostly don't appear – as themselves, or as writers or artists – and their absence haunts the volume. I read somewhere

Te Ao Marama (this world) is always accompanied by the shadow of the void: the shadow as the residue of presence, the Mauri in one's footprints. In this way, for many Maori, photographs have a life of their own, an animation, just as the chips from a carving are sacred in their potential for recreating the (negative) image of the ancestor. <sup>15</sup>

In this sense, *Double Vision* is far from a non-event. It contains some controversial ideas worthy of debate, and plenty of shadows. It will have uses in postgraduate classes in art history, history, english, visual studies, anthropology and cultural studies with a South Pacific specialisation.

## **NOTES**

I acknowledge the sharing of viewpoints that I received from attending seminars given by Bob Jahnke, Shane Cotton and Kura Te Waru Rewiri to Media Studies and to Women's Studies at Massey University, and from participating in *Toioho Ki Apiti* Maori Art Conference, run by Te Putahi a Toi (Maori Studies) at Massey in 1996. The work and writings of Merata Mita, Ngahuia Te Awekotuku and Rangihiroa Panoho have also informed the article. Obviously, none of what have to I say is their responsibility.

- <sup>2</sup> Losche, p. 211.
- <sup>3</sup> Thomas, p. 13.
- <sup>4</sup> See Rajchman, J. (1988). 'Foucault's Art of Seeing', *October*, 44, pp. 89-119, and Jay, M. (1988) 'Vision and Visuality', in Foster, H. (Ed.), *Dia Art Foundation Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, (Seattle: Bay Press.)
- Mitchell, T. (1992). 'Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order', in Dirks, N.B. (Ed.), Colonialism and Culture, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press). See also Lalvani, S. (1993). 'Photography, epistemology and the body', Cultural Studies, 7:3 (October), pp. 442-465; Tagg, J. (1995) The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press). Marien, M.W. (1997) Photography and Its Critics. A Cultural History, 1839-1900. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); Star, L. (1999). 'Blacks are back': ethnicity, male bodies, exhibitionary order', in Law, R. Campbell, H. and Dolan, J. (Eds), Masculinities in Aotearoa/New Zealand, (Palmerston North: Dunmore Press).
- <sup>6</sup> McLean (1999), p. 142.
- <sup>7</sup> Brunt (1999), p. 269.
- Spivak, G.C. (1988) 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Reprinted in Ashcroft. B, Griffiths. G. and Tiffin, H. (Eds), (1995) *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. (London: Routledge); Barthes, R. (1972) 'Dominici, or the triumph of literature', reprinted in During, S. (Ed.), (1992) *The Cultural Studies Reader*. (London: Routledge).
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- Panoho, R. (1992). 'Maori: At the Centre, On the Margins', in Barr, M. (Ed.), *Headlands. Thinking Through New Zealand Art*. (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art), p. 124.
- <sup>11</sup> Taussig, M. (1993). *Mimesis and alterity: A particular history of the senses*. (New York and London: Routledge); Bell (1999).
- 12 Panoho, R. (1992), ibid. p. 24.
- 13 Jahnke (1999).
- Young, R.J.C. (1995), Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race. (Lendon and New York: Routledge.)
- 15 Author unknown.