



ART

The medium is the message

For Maori, painting is not just a means of illustrating things or ideas but a tradition connecting people to their land.

by EDWARD HANFLING

In a glass case as you enter the exhibition *Five Maori Painters* are the raw materials of Maori painting. Kokowai is the name for pigments that come from the earth – red ochre mixed with oil or water, black from wood resin or kauri gum, white and blue from clay.

Turning from the kokowai to look at the paintings, you see colour like it was just invented. In Emily Karaka's paintings, the protests and Treaty claims of the 1980s-90s sing out in glorious and defiant hues.

Blimey, you say? Put a lid on it? Well, perhaps such rhapsodic prose does not

become me, but I think curator Ngahiraka Mason has come up with a corker of a way of saying to the viewer at the outset that, for Maori, painting is not just a means of illustrating things or ideas.

It is true that two of the artists, Karaka and Robyn Kahukiwa, use their medium to make statements about Treaty claims and social injustice. But a more interesting proposition is that there is meaning in the medium itself; painting is a tradition that connects a people to their land.

Considering the exhibition as a kind of landscape, the background is one long unbroken wall that begins with the kokowai and includes a painted heke (rafter) and hoe (canoe paddle), 19th-century photographs (by the Burton Brothers), lithographs (by artists such as George French Angas) and a few smallish works by the five featured artists.

This background helps us to understand the main "landmarks" of the exhibition. The colours and motifs of the heke, for instance, bear comparison with Kura Te Waru Rewiri's paintings, inspired by the unusual pastel colours of kowhaiwhai in Ratana churches.

Star Gossage's *Pakiri Pa* (2000), painted with oil and clay pigments from the landscape it represents, sets the scene for her paintings on an adjacent wall. These are hung at different heights to form their own rolling terrain, leading the viewer from the gloom and shadow of the early works towards a lighter, livelier touch.

Curatorial cuteness always irks me, but at least here it is based on a compelling idea about the relationship between art and whenua. A more cogent criticism of the exhibition would be that not all the works show the artists to best advantage: Gossage's most recent solo show at Tim Melville Gallery was stronger than the Auckland Art Gallery selection; Karaka has surely done something since 1997; and some of Saffronn Te Ratana's superb paintings of the early 2000s should have been included, rather than just a solitary pencil drawing (exquisite nonetheless) and a new commissioned installation, *Whakarongo Ki Te Karanga*.

Yet in thinking about Te Ratana's installation, I realise the exhibition as a whole is immune to my judgments, coming as they do from a white male who has been found guilty more than once of the heinous crime of formalism – that is, judging an artwork for what it looks like rather than what it means.

Whakarongo Ki Te Karanga consists of an undulating mattress and two paint-encrusted trees, with branches carrying Maori words and phrases and tiny birds

The paintings are worth seeing not because they fit trends but because they are distinctive.



carved out of paint. Te Ratana is not trying to make something that looks like art, but to teach te reo to her mokopuna. (I imagine them sprawled comfortably on their padded gold Papatuanuku, gazing up at the yellow branches, reciting the words.)

Still, this is the only work in the exhibition that challenges expectations about what a painting should look like – which is what good paintings invariably do.

And Te Ratana's sumptuous colours suggest she cannot help being a terrific artist even when she is not trying.

It is refreshing to see attention paid specifically to Maori painters (and, although the exhibition title does not draw attention to it, female painters).

Interestingly, although the exhibition *My Country: Contemporary Art from Black Australia*, also at Auckland Art Gallery, covers a wider range of contemporary art media, its paintings stand out as embedded in a specific place and culture.

The mesmerising spidery lines of Arthur Tjaitjarra Robertson's *Tjinytjira* (2006) and

the massive, uninhibited blobs in Dadda and Judith (Anya) Samson's *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2010) appear as a kind of free-form abstraction. The artists, though, are guided by a sense of logic and inevitability; their compositions are effectively maps of culturally significant landmarks.

The most magical things in *My Country* are the stripy, feather-adorned Banumbirr (morning star) poles and Vincent Serico's

painting *Carnarvon Collision (Big Map)* (2006) – a record of conflicts between the indigenous Jiman people and white settlers rendered in careful dots, smudges and outlines, scattered across a vast landscape.

These (like the paintings in *Five Maori Painters*) are worth seeing

not because they are radically new art or because they fit current art-world trends but because they are distinctive. In contrast, the various photographic and video works look pretty much like the boring global style called "contemporary art". ■

FIVE MAORI PAINTERS, until June 15, and MY COUNTRY: CONTEMPORARY ART FROM BLACK AUSTRALIA, until July 20, Auckland Art Gallery.



Their land: top, Star Gossage's *Pakiri Pa*; above, Vincent Serico's *Carnarvon Collision (Big Map)*.