

Excerpt from 'RE-CODING THE NA(rra)TIVE'

A quick Google image search of 'Māori people' will yield faded photographs of dark-skinned people dressed in woven cloaks and grass skirts, faces tattooed with spiraling, dark lines, their image locked by black and white and sepia tones to a time long past. Amongst these images of antiquity are higher resolution, colour photographs. Similarly dressed, these people look fierce, eyes bulging and tongues blaring in performative song and dance. These are not the type of Maaori you will see in public spaces, though. This is merely a simple search engine result generated by popular, albeit misaligned, perceptions. The Maaori you are more likely to find are dressed in nylon and polyester, carried by American branded sneakers through shopping centres and driving Japanese cars to their suburban homes.

Throughout my life, it was between these representations that I searched for my Maaori self. The 'authentic' Maaori and the rest of us 'Plastics'. Standardised by a specific, limited scope of Maaori experience, my criterion of cultural authenticity did not include myself, leading to continuous feelings of displacement. While the standard has shifted over my life, subconsciously reassessed through evolving situations and contexts, the feeling has remained constant. When one is repeatedly reviewing themselves against a criterion of cultural authenticity determined by essentialist ideas, they will find themselves, or others, as outsider.¹

Making art has been a mode for exploring these questions and experiences of displacement. Through my art practice I have considered what constitutes contemporary Maaori art, and in turn, a contemporary Maaori identity. Looking to the representation of Maaori in dominant (Western) art history, I have found myself continuously displaced by imagery that is either generated from the distancing, objective colonial gaze, or a subjective experience that doesn't articulate my own. Where paradigms of identity are deliberated, notions of authenticity arise, operating on a set of inclusionary/exclusionary factors. Regardless of what the identity is, limited representations will always leave people sitting uncomfortably at the margins.

These are not a unique set of experiences, but the complexity of a contemporary Maaori

identity, one that is experienced within a history of political struggle and dynamic, and oft times radical, adjustment. Environmental, Indigenous, and human rights advocate Tina Ngata (Ngāti Porou) states that, "To be born Indigenous is to be born into a political reality"². To be Maaori is to be political, to actively resist colonial narratives and forces. Operating within White heteronormative male-dominated spaces, which is the reality for many Maaori, demands satisfying a vast array of at times contradictory requirements. Without dwelling on the negatives, it can be, in short, draining. This is, however, what it means to be Indigenous, so for many it has also become second nature.

My art is a consideration of identity politics, primarily concerned with colonial notions of authenticity and cultural essentialism. The need to position myself and express my identity as Maaori and Queer is what compels me to make art of this nature. Through my artworks I question and disrupt colonial narratives, reworking representations of Maaori to assert my experience and identity as tangata whenua. Our representation through painting, photography, and film/moving image has been dominated by stereotypes coded with a set of signs that uphold colonial ideologies of the Other. Generated and maintained via a complex, incestuous history of European artworks, it is difficult, and I argue fruitless, to isolate the source. Colonial ideas are bred and inbred, their degenerate spawn copulating and producing further corrupted concepts manifest in the canon of Western art history. Their reach is widespread, from the North African 'Orient' to the 'South Seas' of Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa. Deeply entrenched and virulently prevailing, these signs create and maintain the notion that there is an authentic type of Maaori and whatever that looks like, this author is not one of them.

This is an excerpt from Matt Tini's exegesis for his Master of Fine Arts at Toi Rauwhāangi, College of Creative Arts, Massey University, completed November 2022.

1. Sissons, Jeffrey. *First peoples: Indigenous cultures and their futures*. Reaktion Books, 2005.

2. Ngata, Tina. *Kia Mau: resisting colonial fictions*. E-book, Kia Mau Campaign, 2019.