

Undermining the original, copying to create: an interview with Ayesha Green

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Much like the super city itself, our art community here in Auckland is small but sprawling. Just as tourists to our city are bewildered to find there is no simple way to move between ostensibly major attractions, no simple way to get anywhere without a car, newcomers to our art scene may wonder at the apparent disconnect between the provocative works being exhibited in artist-run spaces and what hangs on the walls of our major institutions.

With this dissonance in mind, Mirage Gallery's exhibition of Ayesha Green's *Tama Ki Hikurangi, Renata Kawepo* as part of their Seagers Walters Prize exhibition (a cheeky and parodic but nonetheless esteemed competition which has run alongside the industry sanctioned Walters Prize since 2012) just one month before the opening of *The Māori Portraits: Gottfried Lindauer's New Zealand* at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki seems wonderfully serendipitous. The work comprises of two monumental portraits hung in a corner so the figures almost appear to be eyeing each other up, a curious dynamic, given both paintings are of the same man: Ayesha's tupuna, Renata Kawepo. The paintings are copied from the two distinct portraits Lindauer made of him in 1885, one of which shows Kawepo as he would have looked at the time, elderly and missing his right eye, while the other shows him as he presumably appeared in his prime, in Māori dress and clutching a mere. Unable to view these works in the flesh, Ayesha painted from images she found online – one from Auckland Art Gallery's [Whakamīharo Lindauer Online](#), the other from [a grainy image posted on flickr](#) in 2006. The poor quality of this latter internet image combined with a perverse desire to stay true to the process of copying led to certain idiosyncrasies: Kawepo's tattoos, for example, do not match. Refusing to fill in the gaps with any knowledge the other portrait might provide; Ayesha only painted what she could decipher from the particular image she was working from. These discrepancies work to exacerbate the schism between the "original" and the "copy", opening up a space to question the assumptions of authenticity and authorship within the settler artist/indigenous subject dichotomy.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the astute and necessary questions the work provokes, Ayesha beat out the other Seagers Walters Prize contestants (Li-Ming Hu, Fu-On Chung and Jack Hadley) to take home the coveted box of gin and begin planning her residency at [Te Arerenga](#) in Rarotonga next year. In the peaceful moment between this triumph and the opening of the much anticipated Lindauer exhibition, I caught up with Ayesha to talk about ethnic tourism, mimicry as subversion, and the cult of authenticity.

Lucinda: Having *Tama Ki Hikurangi*, *Renata Kawepo* show at *Mirage* so close to *The Māori Portraits* opening at Auckland Art Gallery seems too good to be true. Was the timing deliberate or just luck?

I was always aware that a Lindauer show was on the horizon. His works were touring overseas and I know Ngahiraka Mason had been working and researching around his works for many years. When I began researching this work I had planned to show alongside the Auckland Art Gallery exhibition, I thought it was a fitting opportunity that could perhaps open the work to a wider conversation beyond the paintings themselves. For a while I didn't think it was going to match, but when *Mirage* approached me it ended up being perfect timing. Although not completely at the same time, I still felt it was enough for my work to be able to speak to the relationship between the institution and the artist-run-space. Although perhaps it wasn't directly about the artist run space, but instead I was thinking about alternative ways of interpreting and reading Lindauers work that maybe the Auckland Art Gallery weren't able to provide.

I had also thought about showing the work in the Wharekarakia at Omahu. I was thinking about ways in which different spaces allow for different types of knowledge's and histories to become present. My interests lie in the paradox that these representations of Māori are playing out and reinforcing tropes around the exotic other, the noble savage and the dying race, and in this same instance these paintings hold tremendous amounts of mana and are ways in which we are able to connect with our tupuna. I was questioning, how does and how can the presentational context determine the way in which these works are read as well as thinking around and considering who it is that is making the paintings.

Do you think that could perhaps be a way to address some of the problems your paintings bring up, if the portraits lived in a marae rather than being held by large institutions?

The works will always be read and understood in different ways. I think the most positive way the works can be read is if decedents were able to have control of the presentation and display of their tupuna. I know that the Auckland Art Gallery does take this concern seriously, however I do think Māori should be given the rights and the means to guard and care for their own taonga within their own marae and I'm not just talking about the Lindauer portraits. But we still live in a society that believes museum and gallery systems are the best ways that objects can be looked after. I would be all for alternative ways of care or alternative ways of approaching ownership and guardianship. Although a lot of protocols are in place that seek the appropriate permissions and are seemingly tikanga in worldview, it is still a colonial structure and Māori are only able to engage within this colonial system. However, what is interesting is that prints of these images live in marae all over New Zealand.

And these prints hold as much mana as the original painting. So maybe the 'awe' or importance of the original becomes undone. – I enjoy that.

The importance of the original, is that maybe a colonial construct?

I think about the power of mimicry a lot and the power that mimicry has to dismantle "originality" and essentialism.

To elaborate; when culture is constantly performative and constantly changing, there is always a slippage between the current performance and the next performance and that's where things change and how cultures shift and move. Essentialist ideas are fixed and stagnant. However mimicry possess the power to show that fixed identities are in reality fluid because the original, the fixed, is broken. The original is undermined, the essence is undermined. When I mimic Lindauer's paintings I'm trying to undermine the position of power he has in creating knowledge about Māori. I'm trying to undermine the way he essentialises.

Your work *Tama Ki Hikurangi*, *Renata Kawepo* copies two paintings Lindauer did of your tipuna, Renata Kawepo. Are they both held by Auckland Art Gallery and do you know if they will be in the upcoming exhibition?

I'm not sure, I think *Renata Kawepo*, *Tama Ki Hikurangi* will be as it's in their collection, but the other one, which is actually titled the same, but less documented, is in Whanganui (Regional Museum). Through all the documentation there is one story of Kawepo, how he lost his eye. The story goes that during battle he killed a man, and that mans wife was so upset that she gauged out Kawepo's eye. Kawepo was so impressed with her loyalty that he then married her. I found out just recently that this is a common story told by Auckland Art Gallery staff to gallery visitors, which added another layer. There becomes this one narrative that defines his life, and it's grown from this painting and the abnormality of having one eye. And also what must be mentioned, is Lindauer adding the eye to one of his portraits - sometimes there can be too much exotic, so it seems.

There will be tourists travelling back to their countries, retelling this story so it almost becomes a myth associated with these portraits...

Visitors, tourists or locals alike, come to see it and they grab tiny narratives to take back and repeat. In this way Kawepo's story becomes a part of the tourist's travel story. That's the power of this kind of representational painting, and of settler painting – these stories are quite romantic and strange, so easy and didactic. Lindauers portraits become a way in which tourists can have, create and take home knowledge about Māori people and Māori culture. This can be problematic, if this is the only way Māori culture or the representation of Māori is presented, then Māori remain an exotic, noble and dying race and our culture is othered.

It's strange to think that the portraits function as 'tourist art' in this way today, but when Lindauer was painting them they were 'tourist art' in a different sense – he was painting Māori people from the position of a tourist himself.

Lindauer was painting from a point of view that utilised ideas around the exotic, which is how tourists also view the places in which they travel. The same colonial tropes are re-enacted in tourism.

We first met through my role as one of the curatorial team at Window in the lead up to your 2015 exhibition [For Karetoki](#). Your painting of Pania for this show also dealt with concerns around ethnic and cultural tourism.

My art practice and research sit under the umbrella of tourism, it's an extremely rich and complicated social phenomena. Basically ethnic tourism is the activity in which 'other' cultures are gazed upon and consumed as an experience or a spectacle. Meaning that tourism, like settler society, uses essentialist ideology to produce knowledge about that "other" culture – these are my concerns; ethnic tourism is aiding and reinforcing racist stereotypes and produces race-based and ethnicity-based essentialist knowledge. Ethnic identities become a form of human capital where essentialism is key to that capital.

You would think we would have moved on.

Tourists today are generally aware of their position, but they continue to seek the authentic. Tourists want to see the backstage, they want to get behind the spectacle, but in response to that the backstage becomes staged and so on and so on.

I've recently been reading about contemporary art's obsession with authenticity which has seemingly (re)emerged as a kind of countermovement to the prevalence of mass production and the endless circulation of content and experiences.¹ The obvious context for this is online where we have, for example, the popular notion that one "performs" the self via social media, as though the self you are online is somehow not authentic, or less authentic. But then there are so many similar trends manifesting simultaneously offline, such as the unprecedented popularity of "untouched" travel destinations like trekking in Bhutan, taking a donkey up Machu Picchu or staying at an ashram in India. These experiences are formulated to trick you into thinking you can truly be part of these cultures which are not yours. You wouldn't be able to experience them except from the privileged position of a tourist.

¹ Erika Balsom, "Against the Novelty of New Media: The Resuscitation of the Authentic," in *You Are Here Art After the Internet*, ed. Omar Kholeif (UK: Cornerhouse and SPACE, 2014), 66-77.

I've always felt that authenticity is perhaps a semantic trap that we fall into, however in critical tourism theory authenticity exists in a binary with modernity. Authenticity is not a positive term in this particular discourse which runs alongside, and within, a settler colonial discourse. Authenticity is something that is produced by tourists and settlers, authenticity is something that is imagined and projected onto the "other" culture. To think you can authentically experience another culture is to buy into essentialism, meaning that authenticity only exists in essentialist ideas.

Around the time of your Window exhibition you were working on a piece of writing as part of your studies which engaged with some of the theory around cultural tourism...

I was taking a post-graduate paper, Tourism and Cultural Heritage, taught in the sociology department. For our final essay I wrote about Napier's *Pania of the Reef* statue and the roles of authenticity and symbolism. I argued that *Pania of the Reef* was actually a symbol of Pākehā culture as opposed to Māori culture because of how it was created, its format, its context and its agency.

Do you mean the use of bronze (as such a historicising medium), where it is sited and how it functions in that space?

That was one element, that local Māori history was being portrayed using European sculptural and pictorial tropes. The statue was commissioned as a part of an Urban Boosterism scheme that Napier adopted in the early 20th century. This type of scheme is about getting more people to live in your city for capitalist reasons. As modern people became more apt to leisure, cities were forced to offer arts and leisure activities to attract numbers; the statue was a part of this. The socio-political implications of this are; firstly, that local Māori history is reduced to myth, secondly Māori history is used for Pākehā capitalist benefits and thirdly Māori culture is only included in the cityscape symbolically, on a superficial level. The actual inclusion of Māori communities and culture was (is) only done to continue the colonial imperative. Māori land was being stolen, Māori were being assimilated, reo was illegal, the list goes on. Therefore *Pania of the Reef* is really a symbol of Pākehā society and how it treats Māori culture. However, in saying this, I do not want to take away or belittle the amount of pride that local Māori felt in their inclusion within the cityscape. I would argue though that that feeling of pride has grown from continuous oppression. But also, to expand on this, *Pania of the Reef* is just one example in a larger picture, that being our national identity and the rhetoric surrounding that concept.

Art historian Jonathan Ngarimu Mane-Wheoki has described Pākehā as "the people who define themselves by what they are not. Who want to forget their origins, their history, their cultural inheritance – who want Māori, likewise, to

deny their origins so that we can all start off afresh.”² In a similar vein, Miri Davidson wrote a [brilliant essay](#) during the height of the New Zealand flag debate in which argued that John Key’s heady desire to change the flag was essentially an attempt to erase our colonial history, and thus erase indigenous presence. As [Key said](#) himself, “It’s my belief... that the design of the New Zealand flag symbolises a colonial and post-colonial era *whose time has passed.*” (emphasis my own)

Do you think *Pania of the Reef* is a way of Pākehā absorbing Māori culture in order to forget our colonial past?

Yes, I am familiar with Miri’s writing, but not this particular piece of Jonathon’s, although I have read similar things. Yes, I agree with the word absorbed, except Pākehā are not trying to absorb Māori culture they are trying to absorb authenticity – which, I hate to be aloof, is a dense and hard-to-explain theory and deserves more attention and care than a brief explanation from myself.³ However, the difference between *Pania of the Reef* and what Miri is saying is the social context. Our national identity, which was slowly being formed during the urban boosterism period, was being created with the aid and appropriation of Māori symbols and then later Key’s ignorant post-colonial understanding is a symbolically violent act of forgetting.

Your painting style is quite distinctive – flat and linear with these bright, light colours. Is this simply how you paint, or does it have a particular significance within this idea of mimicry?

It is simply how I paint, they are extremely logical to me.

I feel that’s allowed, given all of the very thoughtful, deliberate choices and references being made elsewhere in your work. Even your choice of frames seems to nod to these histories, they look a lot like the black frames which tend to house Lindauers and Goldies.

There’s something in them being so simplified which makes the differences between your paintings and Lindauers even more pronounced – they’re copies but they’re also “original”.

² Jonathan Ngarimu Mane-Wheoki, “From Zero to 360 degrees: Cultural Ownership in a Post-European Age.” Presentation at *International Council of Museums Council for Education and Cultural Action Conference, Christchurch, 29 October – 2 November 2000*, 10. Archived online at https://web.archive.org/web/20061004071817/http://www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz/icomceca2000/papers/Jonathan_Manewheoki.pdf

³ Avril Bell, “Indigenous Authenticity and Settler Nationalisms” in *Relating Indigenous and Settler Identities* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 25-57. DOI: 10.1057/9781137313560.0005.

You have a very research-based painting practice so it does seem quite poetic that the end product appears so slick and simple, as though you've assessed all the stories and materials and edited them back to these incredibly concise objects with very clear references.

I have realised just recently that my works end up having these large backstories. I like that the paintings don't stop being active after their presentation, that histories are told, ideas are discussed. Every time I begin a new research project I approach my Nana with my ideas and she always points me in the right direction, or knows somebody who knows something about it. – I love being able to talk it through with her. She worked really close with me while I was researching around Kawepo and we ended up reconnecting with long lost family members. This is the type of thing that is important to me. The things that happen along the way.

It would be wonderful if an institution like Auckland Art Gallery showed your work so when people came in and asked to see the Māori art, it would be so complex to answer. It's already difficult because there are the Māori portraits which are, as we've discussed, not Māori art at all but settler depictions of Māori people. Then there are the works by Māori artists, the Lonnie Hutchinson panels, Michael Parakowhai sculptures, Ralph Hotere paintings... and then there would be your paintings, which manage to fit into both categories. They're Māori portraits by a contemporary Māori artist.

The difference is that I am not a settler artist, I am representing my tupuna, my connection with him is not through a colonial gaze. We have to think about portraiture in a different way as well, it could be argued that Hotere, Parakowhai and Hutchinson are creating Māori portraits. Perhaps thinking about portraiture in this way becomes semantically messy, but carving, tukutuku etc are portraiture outside of the Eurocentric definition. However, yes, I understand what you're saying; it's the undying question, what is Māori art?

It's definitely a tricky space to navigate, both how to determine and how to frame these shows. In the case of emerging Māori and Pacific artists we have the Tautai Tertiary Exhibition and various Elam Tuakana shows, which are so necessary and should absolutely exist, but we end up with these groups of young artists leaving art school having only ever shown as part of these ethnicity-based group shows, and this framework gets repeated by larger institutions when they divide their space into 'Māori art', 'Pacific art' and 'European Art'.

We do need to hold these institutions accountable for their continual essentialist categorising. In regards to the Tuakana shows and Tertiary Tautai shows, Māori and Pasifika artists should freely be allowed to talk inwardly, especially when Māori and Pasifika artists are still the minority and Māori and Pasifika world views are not

prevalent in the art schools that they attend. Perhaps we need to think of the art institutions as larger and more complicated versions of art schools.

Auckland Art Gallery should be held accountable depending on how they hang this Lindauer show. How will it work, who is in the position of power, is it Māori presenting their ancestors or is it the institution presenting Gottfried Lindauer, the settler portrait artist? Yet, maybe it doesn't have to be one thing or the other. However, the power of this type of representational painting needs to be held accountable. How do these paintings effect Māori identity when the exotic noble savage is *still* a part of an artistic discourse within a Eurocentric gallery system.

Nothing is prescribed entirely to history.

This is the paradox I'm so interested in, these are settler paintings which both create settler knowledge and also hold extreme mana. They are amazing taonga, but how can these objects do both things and be both things when they are just one object? How are we able to break these binaries?

Do you have any plans for how you will use your residency at Te Arerenga in Rarotonga?

I'm not completely sure. I haven't traveled much, which might seem ironic due to the nature of my work, so it would only be fitting to think about tourism and my position over there as a tourist. I've been researching a tiny bit about the FIT (Free Independent Traveler, young, generally white, middle-class, tech savvy, selfies, Instagram, expecting to 'find themselves' etc.) Who, as their name might suggest, are full of wonderfully, disastrously problematic things. I guess I will be playing the role of the FIT. I think I might just do some anthropology on myself.