

Shane Cotton

b.1964

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Shane Cotton's paintings refer to the stories of Aotearoa New Zealand – legends of the land and the ancestors, and the impact of colonisation, past and present. He once said, “I wanted to paint the land, but the only way you can paint it is to look at the stories and events connected to it, and you come to appreciate it in a personal way”.

Cotton, who has Ngāpuhi ancestry, grew up with a dual cultural heritage, living in a Pākehā suburb but spending summer holidays in the Tai Tokerau region of Northland. Much of his work has explored this bicultural heritage. His earlier paintings were inspired by Māoritanga in 19th century meeting houses like Rongopai on the East Coast – a creative adaptation of Pākehā materials and images. Cotton 'borrowed' motifs from Māori folk art in his painting, appropriating them just as the original artists had drawn on the techniques and materials of the Pākehā settlers.

During the 1990s, Cotton's works became more complex as he began researching his own Ngāpuhi tribal background, and in particular the impact of Christianity in the early 19th century. Ngāpuhi meeting houses have almost no decoration – none of the carvings, kōwhaiwhai paintings or tukutuku wall panels that are a feature of Māori buildings in other parts of the North Island. Why? European missionaries believed the local art tradition was incompatible with Christianity and suppressed it. But also, many Māori artists from the early 19th century were killed in the Musket Wars between 1818 and 1824.

The idea of the bare meeting houses acted as a spur for Cotton. He began a new series of symbolic landscapes which referred to the conflict between Māoritanga and Christianity as a battle of signs and images. He mixed Māori and Christian imagery, incorporating Māori translations from the *Book Of Genesis*, the first book in the Bible, with a new lexicon of symbols drawn from traditional art forms such as carving and kōwhaiwhai.

Kenesis: Kotahi Ki Kotahi ('one to one') is linked to Cotton's sombre 'Kenehi' (Genesis) paintings of the late 1990s. It's a spare abstract work with large empty spaces. The painterly bands of grey, brushed over a dark background, recall the moody atmospheric landscapes of Colin McCahon (check out his *Tomorrow Will Be The Same But Not As This Is*).

Like McCahon, Cotton uses words – and religious texts – in his painting. And like McCahon, Cotton's imagery is obscure and ambiguous. He doesn't make it easy for us. It's up to us to make the connections and ponder the meaning.

Although it's linked to Cotton's 'Kenehi' (Genesis) paintings, the title of this work is not 'Kenehi' – the Māori transliteration of 'Genesis', but 'Kenesis'. You won't find that word in the dictionary. You will find 'kinesis', meaning 'movement, in response to a stimulus'. Is Cotton making an analogy with the colonisation of New Zealand – a 'stimulus' that prompted the need for Māori and Pākehā adaptation ('movement') – a process that continues today?

Jill Trevelyn

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www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz
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www.tepapa.govt.nz

Books:

Strongman, L. (2004). *Shane Cotton*, Victoria University Press.
 Tyler, L. (1998). *Shane Cotton*, Hocken Library, Dunedin.

Web search:

Colin McCahon

