

Ralph Hotere

b.1931

New Zealand Art Societies Fellowship: Central School of Art, London

When in March 2003, against the wishes of the United Nations, President George W. Bush ordered the invasion of Iraq by United States military forces, Britain and Australia agreed to send in their troops as well. In New Zealand, Parliament was divided, with the Act Party and some of the National Party calling for New Zealand to join the United States-led “coalition of the willing”. However, the majority of MPs voted to support the Labour Government, which, like most governments around the world, opposed the use of military force in Iraq.

Ralph Hotere’s 2003 lithographic print *Keep NZ Out Of Iraq* is his personal response to this situation, showing his support for anti-war demonstrators who staged peace rallies throughout New Zealand in the early days of the invasion.

The 24/7 rolling news at the time showed cruise missiles attacking Iraqi cities, along with aerial and artillery bombardment. Oil refineries were attacked and oil wells set on fire. Many commentators spoke of the invasion as a “blood for oil” war. Some pro-American commentators, however, implied the war was “a holy crusade” and Iraq was being attacked for hiding Islamic terrorists and concealing “weapons of mass destruction”. Known for his minimalist, abstract paintings of the 1960s and 1970s, and for his painted and polished corrugated iron works of the 1980s and 1990s, Hotere has also been active from the very beginning of his career as a political artist, making statements through his art to protest against colonialism, racism and pollution of the environment. His art is characterised by his ability to create the maximum impression using the minimum means: the perfect circle, the balanced rectangle, the simple but elegant cross-shape.

Keep NZ Out Of Iraq is art as propaganda – art with a message, art with an opinion. It’s a print, meaning multiple copies can be made cheaply, as befits a propaganda sheet. The design is similar to that of placards, flags or banners. It makes an immediate impact. The slogan “*Keep NZ Out Of Iraq*” is repeated four times like a chant. It expresses a spirit of resistance, a statement of principle.

The work is dominated by the strong red lettering, but it’s held together by a characteristic geometric cross; only this one is not thin and elegant but dripping and tarry, as though dipped in oil. With its blackened cross, flickery words and blotchy, streaky background, this is an image that looks like it’s on fire: murky as the pall of smoke hanging over a trail of fiery destruction.

The graphic flare-up provokes gloomy imaginings. These are terrible war clouds gathering. It also evokes a desert storm – a sandstorm – big and apocalyptic, with the horizontal bar of the cross representing a widescreen landscape obliterated by thick, sticky darkness. Look at that cross again and you might see a “holy crusade” with the Christian cross being smothered by a pitch-black substance generated by the landscape. The blood red letters too, are being blotted out and swathed by billowing gritty clouds that make you think of a rain of oil.

David Eggleton

Galleries and museums:

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz
www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz
www.dunedin.art.museum/collection.asp
www.govtbbrewster.com
www.suecrockford.com
www.tepapa.govt.nz

Books:

David, E. (2007). *Towards Aotearoa: A Short History Of Twentieth Century New Zealand Art*, Auckland, Reed.

Pitts, P. and Wedde, I. (2000). *Black Light: Ralph Hotere: Major Works*, Wellington, New Zealand: Te Papa Press; Dunedin, New Zealand: Dunedin Public Art Gallery.

Film:

Merata, M. (2004). *Hotere*, Paradise Film Productions/Columbia Tristar Home Entertainment. (DVD)

Web search:

Lithography

