

Robyn Kahukiwa

b.1940

Self-taught

Have you ever felt so passionately about something that you just had to speak up? What if rather than write it down or say it out loud, you chose to present your thoughts visually in an artwork? Robyn Kahukiwa's *Haehae Mo Ngā Pēpi Kahui* is an example of how artists can make their point of view known in a unique way. Like advertising, art has a rich history of being a way to reach people and change their minds. People in power have used it to keep things the way they are, while people who want change have used it to show what's wrong with the world, and how things could be different. While art can be something beautiful, it can also be about difficult or ugly things. While art can be something to look at peacefully, it can also be something designed to stir up the emotions and create action.

Kahukiwa's drawing is about a very contemporary issue. The title means 'Lines or marks for the Kahui babies'. Haehae is the name of a pattern of grooves used in Māori carving, and in this work they describe the bloody cuts that the woman is slicing into her skin. The Kahui babies were twins, Chris and Cru, who died in 2006 from multiple injuries. They became a symbol of the horrifying fate of many children who die from child abuse in New Zealand each year. Kahukiwa's artwork is grim and disturbing. Not only is the subject – a woman cutting herself – difficult to look at, but the title written in blood red letters and dripping ink reminds us of the terrible events and deaths of two babies. Kahukiwa wants us to think about what happened, and her artwork becomes a permanent reminder that stops us from forgetting.

This is not the first time Kahukiwa has put political messages in her paintings. Indeed, most of her art is about the struggles of being a Māori woman in New Zealand. She often uses text in her work to drive her message home, and to make sure that the viewer is really clear about what she is trying to say. Her work can be full of grief, as this one is, or full of anger. It is always about justice, a challenge for the viewer to act and make things right.

Haehae Mo Ngā Pēpi Kahui doesn't feature the twins at all. Kahukiwa presents us with a woman who carries the wound for the babies on her skin. This has a number of meanings. Most literally the drawing could symbolise Chris and Cru

Kahui's mother, and her loss. Or the work could refer to the struggle that Māori women face as mothers, trying hard to protect their children (and land and culture) from harm. Or the drawing could stand for Māori society in general, and the loss that all Māori face when their kids – the future – are not kept safe. Whatever specific meaning you get from the image, this work shows why art with a message can be so powerful. It keeps us guessing, and thinking, and in doing that we don't forget.

Damian Skinner

Artist website:

www.robynkahukiwa.com

Galleries and museums:

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz

www.bowengalleries.co.nz

www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

www.govettbrewster.com

www.tepapa.govt.nz

www.victoria.ac.nz

Articles:

www.art-newzealand.com/Issue105/robyn.htm

Books:

Peterson, G. (2001). *Mauri Ora! Robyn Kahukiwa: Art And Life*. Mauri Tu Ltd.

