

Fiona Pardington

b.1961

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Fiona Pardington's photographic print *Solitary Female Huia* resurrects a lost world. The photographer offers us a low-lit, talismanic object for contemplation: an extinct bird, a female huia. The plumage emerges out of darkness; the long beak delicately curves like a crescent moon; there is a sheen on the feathers like that made by moonlight. This is an uncanny creature of the night, a creature from the realm of Hine-nui-te-pō, the Māori Goddess of Death, the ruler of the underworld.

The huia became extinct about 100 years ago. To the Māori it was a semi-sacred bird, whose white-tipped tail feathers were worn in battle by rangatira (chiefs). It was also a bird associated with death; its feathers were used in funeral rites. With the arrival of the Pākehā, the huia became a bird much sought after by Victorian collectors such as Sir Walter Lowry Buller, and this, together with the burning of the forests, the introduction of predator animals, and the transformation of the land for agriculture and industry, led to the devastation of the huia population.

Pardington's photograph is part of a series based on avian collections held by New Zealand museums. Pardington, who is of Kai Tahu, Kati Māmoe and Pākehā descent, has photographed these relics as taonga (cultural treasures), part of her ongoing interest in the continuum of Māoritanga — the role of whakapapa (genealogy) and taonga — that has led her to photographing hei tiki (ancient greenstone pendants) and other historical objects. Over the course of her career as an artist, which began in the early 1980s, her photographs have consistently dealt with the themes of feminism, identity, and the transgressive (the taboo).

Solitary Female Huia is an immaculately rendered photograph of scientific documentation, made using traditional photographic methods and materials, but it is first and foremost a work of allegory. This creature has been anthropomorphised, that is, transformed into a symbol. She resembles a woman wearing a black shawl and a long black dress trimmed with white, as in a portrait photograph taken in Victorian times. Through the magic of the camera lens, *Solitary Female Huia* has been dragged out of the land of the dead into the land of the living. Transformed into a kind of contemporary *memento mori* (reminder of death and times past), she stands for the eternal feminine.

The work is a black and white, beautifully-toned image that is at once severe, formal, sober, respectful and considerate. It has a hushed intensity and immediacy that compels a kind of reverence. The once fluttering and flapping huia, forever stilled, haunts you with its melancholy, and pinpoints your own feelings of loss.

David Eggleton

Artist website:

www.fionapardington.com

Galleries and museums:

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz

www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

www.govettbrewster.com

www.matakanapictures.com

www.mcnamara.co.nz

www.nadenemilnegallery.com

www.suite.co.nz

www.tepapa.govt.nz

www.tworooms.org.nz

Articles:

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Books:

The Heart Derelict Catalogue self-published.

Clarke, Curnow and Wytan. (1991). *Pleasures And Dangers: Art Of The Nineties*, Auckland, Longman.

Eggleton, D. (2006). *Into The Light: A History Of New Zealand Photography*, Nelson, Craig Potton.

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