

Michael Parekowhai

b.1968

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*So low you can't get under it
So high you can't get over it
So wide you can't get around it
Oh rock my soul.*¹

Ever been on a jet plane late at night when from a standing start the pilot suddenly drops the throttle and the aircraft thunders down the tarmac heading for take-off? Ever felt the rush as the lights of the runway stream together in one colour and at exhilarating speed the ground disappears beneath you?

This was the sensation that overcame me when in an otherwise empty gallery I first saw Michael Parekowhai's *The Bosom Of Abraham*. All 22 of them lined up against the walls, 11 light boxes on either side. I had to run up and down the space in between, arms outstretched like a plane. I was flying. Weightless. Stateless. Gravity-free.

This idea of not being connected to a specific place is quite important in getting your head around what *The Bosom Of Abraham* is really trying to say. When you look at the work most people will recognise the artist's use of the traditional Māori kōwhaiwhai pattern. Some will even see how Parekowhai has reinterpreted the heke, or decorated rib form, found in roof support structures of whareniui. But not many will know that the whareniui *The Bosom Of Abraham* supports exist only as an idea. For Parekowhai there is no actual house, only the idea of a house – a house capable of being set up anywhere in the world. He takes his house, *Te Poho O Aperahama – The Bosom Of Abraham* everywhere he goes. No border controls or security checks. Just packs it up in his head like a suitcase and carries it around. From place to place, rohe to rohe, country to country, Parekowhai knows where he is.

Such an assertion by an artist like Parekowhai is meant to be provocative. It says I can be tangata whenua with no whenua. It says being Māori is not about resource management or ownership of real estate. Being Māori is about the possession of the past and the promise of the future. Like it was for Abraham of the *Old Testament Bible*, cultural identity is a state of mind.

Parekowhai is himself a descendent of Abraham. His tipuna Te Rangituatahi was also known as Abraham or Aperahama (Pera for short) Tūtoko and was one of the Tai Rāwhiti rangatira painted by Gottfried Lindauer some time after 1874. This picture is in the Partridge Collection of Māori portraits and is on permanent exhibition at Auckland Art Gallery.

For the biblical Abraham, Father of Nations, it was possible for an iwi to be self-determining, visionary and progressive, unburdened by the baggage of physical property. For Parekowhai's ancestor, a Māori Abraham, there was a similar belief. Deep in his heart, this Aperahama understood that despite his people being displaced in their own land they would never be lost if they always remembered who they were and where they were going.

This work is an important reminder to contemporary Māori of the need to know where we come from in order to be absolutely confident about where we belong. *The Bosom Of Abraham* rocks.

Cushla Parekowhai

¹ Refrain taken from the gospel spiritual *Rock My Soul In The Bosom Of Abraham*.

Galleries and museums:

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Articles:

www.art-newzealand.com/Issue103/parekowhai.htm

