

Reuben Paterson

b.1973

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Hine-nui-te-pō is the Māori Goddess of Death, inhabitant of the underworld where only the dead dwell. She welcomes all who come down from the upper world. One day Maui, the mythic god-hero, tried to get inside her giant body through her vulva and kill her while she was sleeping, so he could become immortal. But the laughter of a fantail woke her up and she crushed him by closing her legs. Hine-nui-te-pō is also called 'Great Lady of the Night'.

Her name is given to Reuben Paterson's screen-printed image of a Rarotongan beach at sunrise or sunset. The beach and palm trees are silhouetted against a darkened sky using different varieties of dark blue glitter. With the work's title, a symbolic dimension is added, for Paterson has a very specific meaning in mind. Speaking of Hine-nui-te-pō, he says: "We all journey our roads towards the same time and place. For Māori she is Hine-nui-te-pō – the Goddess of Death, the only female deity of our own inevitable future. To know, and to accept a cultural finality, is to explore the road travelled in celebration of the living and of life".

While *Hinenuitepo* uses glued on glitter, the most spectacular version of this image – an installation called *When The Sun Rises And Shadows Flee* (2004) in the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, used shimmer discs and large sequins found on advertising hoardings. The colours were much darker than the glitter on the screen-print, so the island was scarcely perceptible.

This kinetic painting was activated by air from a large industrial fan, which sent streaks of shimmering white light across its surface, just like the sea breezes of dawn or dusk, which rustle the trees on tropical islands. This is like the hand of the Goddess of Night herself, or the trembling caused by the sound of her name.

The use of glitter or diamond dust is an exuberant and effective way of providing a two-dimensional spectacle. But Paterson wants his art to go beyond spectacle. He sees his use of the material in terms of presenting celestial or spiritual qualities that can validly enhance Māori motifs. Paterson has often blended aspects of his own genealogy (Ngāti Rangitihi/ Ngāi Tuhōe), with various European art historical design 'brands', so that the motif is not instantly recognisable as 'Māori.' Paterson is interested in an art that is free of overly obvious cultural signs, for as he puts it: "I describe myself as Māori, and feel that my experiences are invested in being Māori. So naturally, the work will be Māori".

John Hurrell

Artist website:

www.reubenpaterson.com

Galleries and museums:

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz

www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

www.govetbrewster.com

www.gowlangsfordgallery.co.nz

Articles:

www.art-newzealand.com/Issue116/reuben.htm

