

Reuben Paterson

b.1973

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*In a sleepy little town
Where soft breezes blow
There's a lovely little Māori miss
I used to know
Someday I will find my way
And I'll return from over the sea
To where my island sweetheart waits for me
Cheryl Moana Marie
Back home she's waiting for me
Cheryl Moana Marie
There on the shore
she waits so patiently.¹*

Remember the Sunday roast cooking and the irresistible smell of hot animal fat wafting out the kitchen window? Remember the glistening mountain of peeled white potatoes cut all nice and even, heaped up on the stainless steel bench waiting to go in the oven? Remember the afternoon request show on ZB radio and the smooth chocolatey voice of John Rowles singing *Cheryl Moana Marie*? Remember those cool polyester Hawaiian 'silk' shirts by Ocean Pacific, with sleek silhouettes of coconut palms growing on coral atolls bursting through psychedelic orange skies? I do. And so do many others, like artist Reuben Paterson, who were kids growing up in the 1970s.

Never Mix Business With Leather is one of Paterson's trademark glitterdust paintings. Although better known for his sparkling, eye-catching kōwhaiwhai designs that dance to a definite Māori beat, this work has more of a tropical Pacific island vibe. Could be something about the sway of palms you'd never find growing in the misty valleys of the Ureweras. Could be something about a Pacific island paradise as a tourist destination. Could be something about the fact that Auckland is the largest Polynesian city in the world. Could be something about the political tendency that conveniently aligns Māori aspirations with those of Pasifika so that tangata whenua miss out again. Could be.

Never Mix Business With Leather is a pun on the proverbial advice, 'never mix business with pleasure'; suggesting that conflicts of interest can be avoided if a person's business or public life is kept entirely separate from their personal or private life. In Paterson's work there is no 'conflict of interest' because his personal interest is the commercial interest. You

can see this in the way that he plays with textile and fashion industry production methods, exploring the possibilities of non-traditional art materials like glitter-dust and fabric. "It's not so much the design side of fashion that appeals to me but the technical side. I like experimenting with different materials",² he says.

Paterson is also sensitive to the way in which vintage clothing and adornment can operate as personal touchstones of memory and nostalgia. He has referred to the largely unknown female genealogy that is a feature of his family history. He calls this lost connection a 'line of adoption'. In the few surviving photographs of his grandmother as a young woman, her well-fitted, beautifully printed clothes are one of the few clues Paterson has to the identity and origins of his mother's Pākehā family.

Never Mix Business With Leather may appear to be no more than a playfully decorative image, with threads of personal memory woven in. But the artist has also selected this image for its ability to suggest associated ideas to the viewer. Those swaying palm trees may be a cliché but they are also an instantly recognisable 'prompt'. We might think of the shared history or common thread that links all Pacific peoples; Te Moana Nui a Kiwa – the Great Ocean of Kiwa reminds us of the ancestors' daring voyages of Pacific exploration and discovery. It's an image that suggests contemporary issues too, for instance the frightening consequences of global warming, rising sea levels and the effects of climate change on the future survival of small, vulnerable island nations just like ours.

Cushla Parekowhai

¹ *Cheryl Moana Marie* by John Rowles.

² Reuben Paterson, artist statement, 1997.

Artist website:

www.reubenpaterson.com

Galleries and museums:

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz

www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

www.govettbrewster.com

www.gowlangsfordgallery.co.nz

Articles:

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

