

Peter Robinson

b.1966

Bachelor of Fine Arts: Ilam School of Fine Arts, University of Canterbury

When I was at Intermediate, to catch the school bus I had to go down into the pedestrian subway and cross over the railway line underground. It was dark in there like a cave. It stank too; all the gross stuff you can imagine. But what I remember most about the subway was how intrigued I was by the graffiti. In the half-light I read the lot: tags, political slogans, absent-minded doodles, passionate declarations of love, obscenities, everything. I was always busy trying to figure out what the hurriedly painted communications meant and whether anyone had left a message just for me.

The mysterious, stylised signs in Peter Robinson's drawing, *Resolution*, insist on being 'read' too. But this kind of reading is somewhere between reading words in an urban concrete cave and deciphering the enigmatic pictograms found in the rock 'art galleries' of archaic, moa-hunter Māori. With this in mind, let's have a go at decoding Peter's hieroglyphics.

One of the easiest shapes to recognise is that of a river or maybe a road leading to a mountain. Next to this is a female-like form wearing an old-fashioned 19th century ankle-length frock. Beside her a male form. Māori probably. Perhaps one of those god sticks or mauri stones that kept watch over the gardens and brought good luck. Next to this, a ladder with an aeroplane above followed by a weapon-shaped patu or a club and last the imprint of a hand or mark of the artist. Question is, when the signs are read together what story do they tell? Whose story is it? Is this interpretation correct or could the signs represent or stand in for something else?

It is important to know that Robinson is from Te Waipounamu, or the South Island, with ancestral links to Ngāi Tahu. Although he often draws deliberate attention to the fact that his mostly Pākehā origins make him a bit of a 'blonde Māori' (someone who has 'grown up away from the marae'), in *Resolution* he makes it clear that he knows exactly where he is from and what his sacred mountain is. The mountain is of course Aorangi, or Mt Cook, returned symbolically in 1998 to Ngāi Tahu iwi as part of the long-awaited 'resolution' of their 1991 Waitangi Tribunal Land Claim.

It is also interesting that *Resolution* was the name of Captain Cook's ship on his second and third voyages to New Zealand. In 1773 the *Resolution* first penetrated extreme southern latitudes proving that the existence of Terra Australis Incognita

or The Great Southern Land was a myth. There was no fertile, inhabited land mass south of the South Island which, even in those days, would have been good news for Ngāi Tahu border control.

In Robinson's work, the aeroplane often appears as a kind of stylised waka with wings, symbolising the mobility of culture and ideas. In *Resolution*, the aeroplane-waka can be read as the new vehicle of the people: the hugely successful Ngāi Tahu corporate structure. Since the 'resolution' of their land claim, sharp organisation, commercial investment and long-term vision have ensured that this iwi will be a powerful political and economic force in the future.

The ladder perhaps signifies the complexity of that future and what it will take to sustain the people and their traditions. As well as being built rung-by-rung on aspirations, hard work and smarts, a successful future will require the iwi to foot it in the global village. But, as Robinson's art often seems to imply, there is a tricky balance to strike between cultural mobility and conservation.

Cushla Parekowhai

Galleries and museums:

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz
www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz
www.dunedin.art.museum/collection.asp
www.govtbrewster.com
www.suecrockford.com
www.tepapa.govt.nz

Articles:

Leonard, R. (1997). 'Peter Robinson's Strategic Plan', *Art Asia Pacific*, 10, pp. 70–73.

