

Joe Sheehan

b.1976

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You thought these were hei tiki forms, right? Look again. You've just been stung by the visual trick that Joe Sheehan plays in this particular work. The key is in the title. Russian or matryoshka dolls are made of painted wood. You open them up, and inside you find a smaller doll, sometimes identical, until you get to the final one, usually a baby, which is carved from solid wood.

Look at the top of Sheehan's silhouettes – there's the Russian doll. The bottom is the hei tiki. As Sheehan puts it, "I got a tiki template and morphed it with a Russian doll silhouette and stopped somewhere around the middle".

To understand why Sheehan would do this, you have to understand something about him personally and the jade trade in New Zealand. Sheehan comes from a stone carving family. His father makes jade carvings for the tourist industry and Sheehan has worked as a full-time stone carver since 1996. But unlike his dad, Sheehan studied jewellery at Unitec. Stone carvers and jewellers share an interest in making things that you can wear. In the 1980s, they were both deeply concerned with natural materials like greenstone, and how these could become as precious as diamonds or gold. They also looked at Māori adornment, and the sense of preciousness that objects such as hei tiki have for their owners and wearers.

But stone carvers and jewellers separate around the question of materials. Stone carving is, as the name suggests, always about stone, whereas jewellery can be made of anything. In the late 1980s, jewellery moved away from natural materials, but stone carving didn't. Sheehan started to think that stone carving was conservative, in need of a radical shake up. A lot of the work in *Lime Light*, his 2005 exhibition, reflected this. Sheehan used the immaculate techniques he had learned in the tourist industry to carve ballpoint pens, a tape cassette (old technology titled *Song Remains The Same*) and other objects from everyday life.

Russian Dolls! is a bit different, although this work is also immaculate, beautifully shaped and polished. The title is a pointer to the source of this jade: Russia. Quite often Russian jade is imported and then passed off as local or treated as second rate because it isn't pounamu (jade from Aotearoa).

Sheehan questions why this might be. Why, if they look equally beautiful, is Russian jade less valued than pounamu? Why do we have to disguise it, pass it off as local jade? Why can't we be honest about its origins?

Central to *Russian Dolls!* is that issue of being tricked. This is a beautiful stone, something that any stone carver would love (which is why Sheehan uses the exclamation mark in the title – this is a real 'doll' of a stone), but how would you feel if you bought it thinking it was pounamu? As Sheehan says, to make the work more saleable, more authentic, "Tourist shops mimic the museum experience". This is why he has marked the back of each silhouette with numbers, a reference to the accession numbers items get when they enter the museum, and also a reference to the way templates are numbered in the souvenir industry.

The visual 'double take' of *Russian Dolls!* is Sheehan's way of asking questions about the way we look at, and value, jade. Just like a matryoshka, things are not always as they seem.

Damian Skinner

Galleries and museums:

www.artsfoundation.org.nz
www.avidgallery.co.nz
www.chartwell.org.nz
www.thegalleries.com
www.timmelville.com

Books:

Sheehan, J. and Rigby, B. (2005). *Limelight: Greenstone By Joe Sheehan*, Auckland, Objectspace.

Web search:

Hei tiki
 Russian dolls

