

John Walsh

b.1954

Self-taught

It's the Māori dreamtime. *There's A Change In The Wind*. I can feel it. So can you. *We Are Of One Mind Here*. From a vantage point perched on the smooth, bald head of a carved pouwhenua, the long legged bird-woman tests the air. Anxious. Expectant. She's waiting for someone. Wonder who? Not to worry e Kui. *They'll Be Here Soon*. Boat loads of them. *Ngā Uri O Kupe*.¹ Descendants of the great Pacific navigator following his example. Riding the ocean currents and favourable stars to splash up on the beach below.

John Walsh likes telling stories. His art imagines other worlds. Strange landscapes and dreamscapes where primal beings, gods and monsters clash in an epic struggle for control of a Māori Middle Earth. Walsh thinks that one way into the worlds he creates is to look with fresh eyes at the past. Through our relationship with the ancestors, Māori are able to connect with the mythic world even though it is often "a universe away from how we have to live now",² he says. In *They'll Be Here Soon*, images of mysterious creatures like the pensive bird-woman tell the story of the artist's adventures in a mythical world, where an active imagination can slip in and out of time and space whenever it wants.

Although the colours of *They'll Be Here Soon* are cool and reflective, the energy the image generates is not. On the horizon clouds are gathering and a storm is brewing. The eye of the hurricane may still be far out to sea, but an ill-mannered whirlwind is about to whip through the scraggy trees any moment now. Much of this charged atmosphere is a product of Walsh's process or the way that he works. "When I paint it's fast and furious". He uses thin oils a bit like watercolour. Where watercolour tends to dry fairly quickly though, Walsh's medium stays loose a little bit longer. Within this relatively short timeframe Walsh can play with the paint as much as he likes. He might continue to apply pigment, maybe wiping some away or perhaps scratching into it and then pushing it round some more. But once the surface goes off Walsh knows, "that's it finished".³

When getting ready to paint Walsh likes to prepare his materials and mental energies ahead of time. He closes

himself off to concentrate, content simply to start by trying all sorts of different approaches until BLAM! something happens and suddenly he's in the zone. When Walsh climbs into this space he chases the sense he has found around and around his board. "I enjoy the challenge of working intensely in short bursts. Somewhere in the corner of my subconscious, connections are made and rhythms start to flow",⁴ he says. While painting, Walsh tunes into the echoes of an ancient past. Often it gets so noisy in the studio that it "feels like I have company", he says.

But when the artist's imaginary playmates have had enough and want to disappear, Walsh knows when to stop. On these occasions, although the artist might have had the initial idea for a painting, other unseen influences tend to take over, steering the process in a completely different direction. When this happens perhaps it is the painter and not the paint that has been manipulated.

Cushla Parekowhai

¹ *There's A Change In The Wind, We Are Of One Mind Here, They'll Be Here Soon* and *Nga Uri O Kupe* are all titles from a series of works painted by Walsh in 2004.

² *This Other World: Six Artists Explore Space & Place*, Dowse Art Museum, Wellington, 2002, p. 8.

³ *ibid* p. 10.

⁴ *ibid* p. 10.

Galleries and museums:

www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

www.johnleechgallery.co.nz

