

Wayne Youle

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A row of plastic lollipops in bright colours – each one a skull. The balance between pleasure and death is an ancient theme in art, as is one thing pretending to be another. When we look at this work, we are intrigued at how real and edible these skully-pops look, but in fact they are synthetic resin, set using a mould made from a novelty eraser. By mounting the skully-pops in a wall rack, the artist is emphasising their fake-ness and their status as art objects – not for eating.

Wayne Youle is rapidly becoming noted in New Zealand art for his playful, sometimes controversial, critique of bicultural stereotypes. His work has been shown in major public gallery exhibitions such as *Techno Māori: Māori Art in the Digital Age* (2001) at City Gallery Wellington, a landmark exhibition that showed the early adoption of new media by young contemporary Māori artists. Some commentators have seen this as a political move by artists, like Youle, who want to work in Western idioms, but want to be free of more traditional modes – like oil painting – that are historically linked to colonialism. But that is another story.

Youle seems to move between media with ease. He likes to ‘quote’ other artists in his work. Frequently, you will see the likes of a Ronnie van Hout ‘monkey’ or Richard Killeen ‘cut-out’ (images that are so closely associated with those artists that they are like logos) referenced in his art. These quotations can trigger strings of associated ideas for the art-literate viewer. In *Skully-Pops (Death Of The Tiki Pop)* Youle appears to be borrowing from the meticulously crafted skulls made by artist, Ricky Swallow. Youle and Swallow are the same age, so to have this cross-reference is a sort of ‘big ups’ of respect to a fellow contemporary. The art of both Youle and Swallow seems to strike a chord with a younger audience because it deals with their generational issues and concerns in ways – irreverent and smart – they can relate to.

At first, this work seems relatively innocuous and a bit of a laugh, but in fact this row of identical cast forms has a serious aspect, bound up with identity and cultural property. The skully-pops are a protest against the way the traditional Māori hei tiki has been commercialised and used in a variety of inappropriate ways ranging from T-shirts, plastic trinkets for tourists, and even candy.

As the work’s title suggests, these skulls represent the symbolic ‘death of the tiki pop’, but skulls in Western/Pākehā culture also represent the dead and ancestors. Youle is offering a lesson as to what the hei tiki means to Māori. At the same time, in Māoritanga the head is tapu, and licking a skull – even a pretend one – is unthinkable. So *Skully-Pops (Death Of The Tiki Pop)* is an equal opportunity bicultural slap in the face, playing both sides off each other.

By being provocative and funny, Youle is able to slip under the radar of good taste and political correctness, and make critical comment about the sacred cows of New Zealand biculturalism in a similar way to slightly older artists like Michael Parekowhai and Peter Robinson. Youle makes you think about the issue without even realising you are, and that makes him an amazingly incisive artist.

Andrew Paul Wood

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Richard Killeen
 Michael Parekowhai
 Peter Robinson
 Ricky Swallow
 Ronnie van Hout

