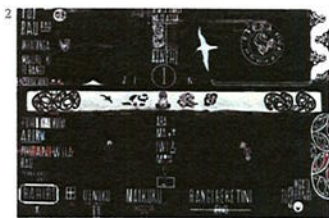
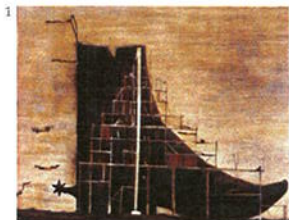


# SHANE COTTON

## IDENTITY AND TRANSFORMATION

The latest work by this New Zealand painter – with its references to both Maori and Pakeha identity – continues to address issues of cultural loss but with a new emphasis on the idea of transformation

WORDS: Laura Murray Cree PORTRAITS: Stephen Oxenbury



1 *Te Ao Hou* (1993), oil on canvas, 122 x 152cm

2 *Eden to Ohiaewai* (2000), oil on canvas, 200 x 300cm

Opposite: Shane Cotton in his studio at Artspace, Sydney

Since 1993, Shane Cotton's subjects have been drawn from history, politics and art. In the contemporary art milieu of moving images, he remains steadfastly a painter. Yet Cotton quickly gained an enviable national and international reputation for producing relevant, complex, edgy works, freighted with mystery, that address issues of identity in an increasingly imperilled global environment.

Cotton is not a history painter in the accepted art-historical sense. "My sense of history is not intellectual," he says, "it's very selective. It's a starting point for a lot of the things I do, the images I use. But my works are not located within that narrow frame. History is part of the subject matter."

Cotton's Maori ancestors were from Northland in New Zealand's North Island. His layered paintings of the early '90s have landscape references that sometimes unfold, Colin McCahon-like, from the centre. They also reflect the symmetry of Maori carving. "On the face of it," Cotton says, "things affect each other across a central line but the closer you look, you see things happening in different ways." Other works contain simple images – a sailing ship, a pot plant, a mountain – scaled metaphorically and contained within the scaffolding of a fragmentary past. This "found" identity is part-Maori, part-Christian, and part a melding of the two. Some of the images in the works are derived from photographs of Maori folk art and rendered in sepia-type colours (although the original works were highly coloured). Popular in the 19th century, these folk paintings were later devalued as either naïve or inauthentic. For Cotton they represent the capacity of his forebears to accommodate an imposed Christianity and Pakeha (non-Maori) way of life within the cleverly veiled forms of their traditional culture.

As the '90s progressed and Cotton's knowledge of Maori language and culture deepened, images connected with his ancestral homelands and beyond began to enter his paintings, along with references to Op and Pop art and a palette extending to black, white, red and later green. Text also began to dominate, reflecting the Christian primacy of the Word, with appropriations from various sources including the Maori Bible. Images reappeared, contained within simple forms floating in a black void, notably the "I" and "O" of the Maori creator "god". These were followed, in the new millennium, by brightly coloured targets, preserved heads (moko mokai), birds, fluorescent twigs and wands and imagined representations of significant stone

monuments, cliffs and canyons. Blue dominated and greys became darker and more ominous.

Cotton says that his latest work is driven by the idea of change; of something that is about to happen or has just happened. He seeks to engage our minds and imagination by evoking something of the drama that surrounds the process of transformation. Where once he sought to pin down his identity through historical fact and narrative, he now explores the slippery ground of fiction and myth to confront broader issues of loss and uncertainty. Commentators with a knowledge and understanding of Maori language and culture have illuminated many aspects of Cotton's work, but now he is open to the possibilities afforded by intuitive, serendipitous and undirected readings.

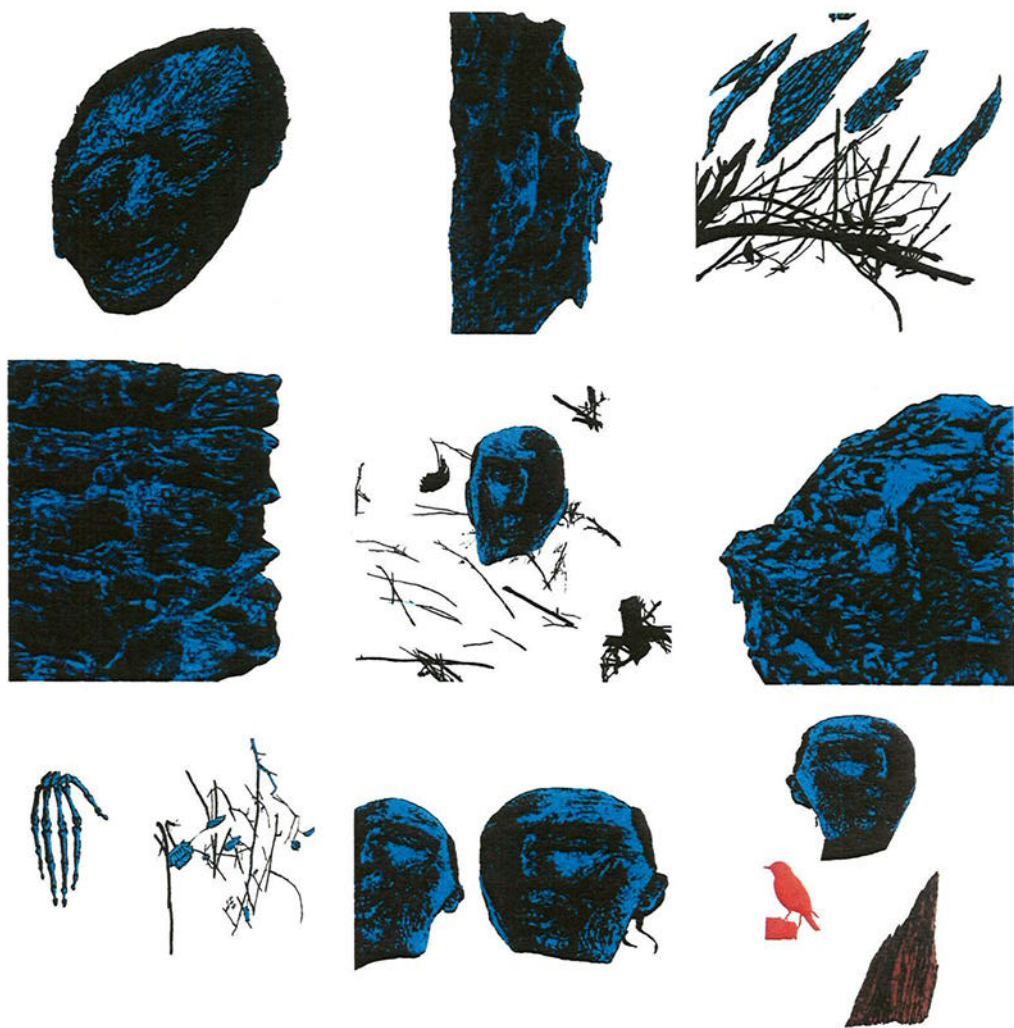
It is mid-autumn, 2008. We are looking at Cotton's paintings on his laptop at Artspace in Sydney, where he will be in residence for the next five weeks. Dream Number 1 (2008), the work (from a suite of four) that holds our attention, is a detached head, encircled by four birds, in the centre of a smallish canvas. A barely perceptible aura of light emanates from the head and the scene unfolds within a softly pulsing grey void.

This is a confronting yet perversely beautiful painting. Uncluttered. There is, as Cotton remarks, "space for things to happen, for contemplation". The head is rendered realistically, worked on by the artist from photographic images of moko mokai in various museums that he projects onto the canvas. It's raw, repelling, without the colourful layering or camouflage of Cotton's earlier heads. "There's economy in terms of how I make them," he says. "On the one hand I try to keep it looking like the original; on the other hand I'm trying to impose a sense of change in the work. What happens in this process is that they transcend the original. There is a moment when you have a sense of life or difference. They're not dead any more – perhaps they're asleep, in a dream state." The birds, in contrast, are stylised, like delicate paper cut-outs (à la Matisse, perhaps), their tail and wing feathers flaring as they appear to signal the four points of the compass.

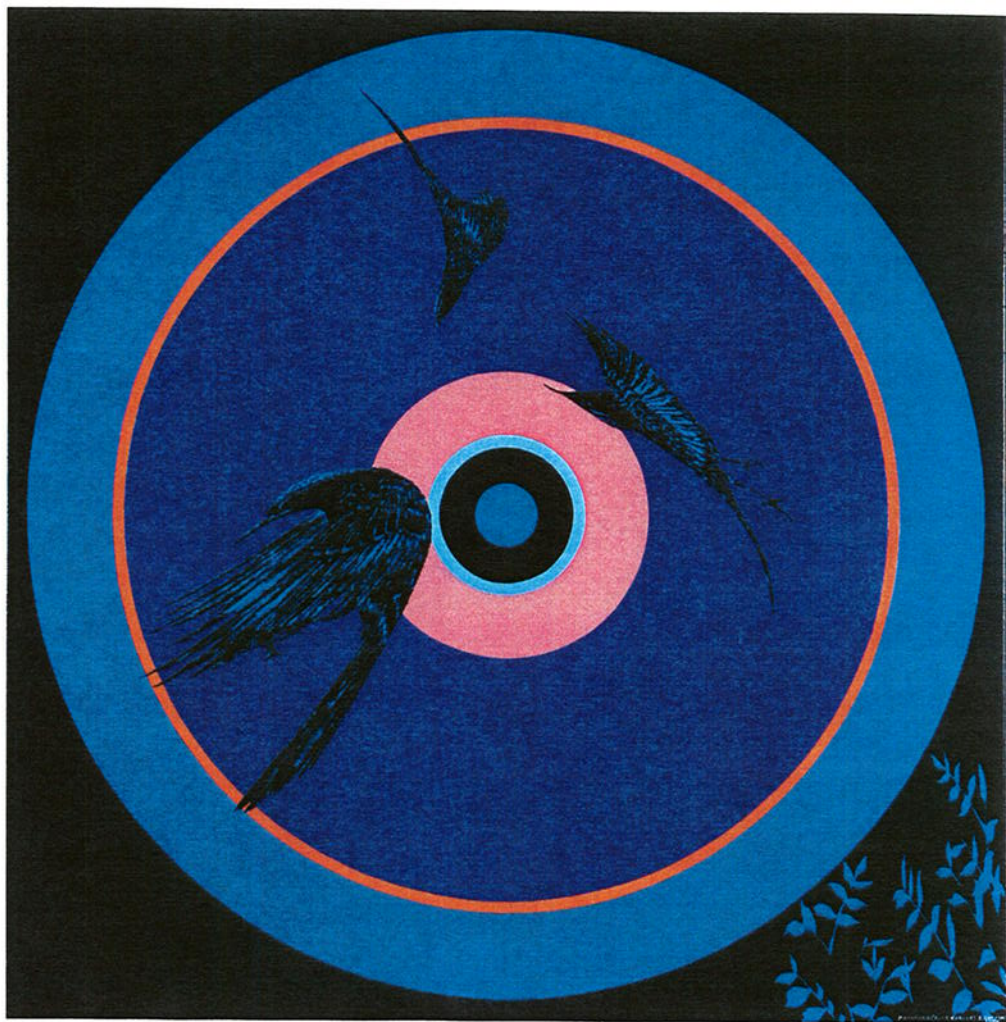
Cotton's moko mokai, rendered in monumental scale, were first seen – amid much controversy – in the exhibition Shane Cotton 1993–2003 at City Gallery Wellington. Moko mokai are highly sensitive remains and are being repatriated to New







Above: A selection of works on paper completed during Cotton's residency at Artspace, Sydney, 2008 Opposite: **Outlook (Red)** (2007), acrylic on canvas, 180 x 160cm



Zealand from museums in the UK and Europe where they have been stored or displayed as curiosities for generations. Cotton explains that because the origins, significance and ceremonial function of many of the heads have now been lost, no one really knows what to do with them: "Some argue that they should be buried, put to rest. Others argue against this because each one has its history and story. Some people are researching the heads individually and looking at the markings, trying to retrace them and get some kind of provenance. But this is also difficult because of the trafficking in heads that occurred. Some of the marks were possibly made after the person was killed, so it's complicated." Because of the many transformations that have taken place to remains that were once people, Cotton says that they represent the grief he feels more generally about his lost heritage. "They are very disconnected objects. I find it interesting revisiting the images, putting them in certain situations and seeing how I interpret them in a new set of circumstances."

**W**e look at another of Cotton's works in this suite of paintings, *Outlook (Red)* (2006) – a small stone carving of an abstracted figure, pitted with time. It is again placed prominently in a grey void, with two realistically painted birds and several fluorescent markers. He includes the latter "to remind us that this is a painting. They create their own drama". Cotton has to point out to me the shape of a smaller figure grabbing hold of the larger stone form. It's unlike other such figures, which are usually singular, and this suggestion of relationship is what takes hold of Cotton's attention. It reminds him of a Northland story about a beautiful bird that visits and revisits a particular rock until an envious chief from another place tries to capture it. The bird becomes frightened and dies and its spirit fuses with the rock. Later, the chief dies and is taken back to the rock. His spirit also fuses with it so that all three – rock, bird and chief – are united in another dimension. The story illustrates the Maori idea that spirit is invested in all things and that all things are connected within a cosmic balance.

The story also inspired a series of works shown in *Red Shift*, Cotton's 2006 exhibition at Sydney's Sherman Galleries. In these works birds fly or float in the void above or beside the edge of a cliff that suggests a massive human profile. In *Takarangi* (2007), for instance, the spirit presence in the rock face seems to infuse the space around it with an

invisible force. The exhibition title refers to the apparent shift in wavelength towards the red end of the spectrum when an object like a star moves away from us, while "blue shift" signals the reverse effect. Cotton's references are poetic rather than scientific and his interest is in the relationships he sets up in the paintings, especially between himself, the cliff, the birds and the viewer.

**T**he predominance of blue in recent works comes from Cotton's reading of passages from *Genesis* in Maori scripture. The word for blue – *kikorangi* – also means "firmament", the elements being literally translated as "flesh" and "sky". The words are used in another new work, *The Sky and Flesh* (2008). Cotton also finds blue a fascinating colour because, on canvas, it can be made to resemble an LED screen or light, bringing us into the present. Time, in Maori culture, he tells me, is very much "in the moment", and even stories about the past are told in the present tense. This is perhaps one reason for his desire to return to earlier works, to look again at targets or combinations of text and image – as in *The Valley* (2007), which is the Maori text of the 23rd Psalm – producing new works that, as he says, "stretch the imagery out".

During his residency in Sydney, Cotton explored the rock and cliff formations in the bays around the harbourside suburb of Woolloomooloo, producing fragmented images that he described to me as: "a kind of unravelling of shards of matter or information... In the past I've tried to capture or allude to the entirety of a particular story, as in the bird myth for example. Here the works on paper are presenting the idea of pieces, or fragments of information and partial truths."

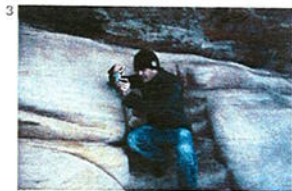
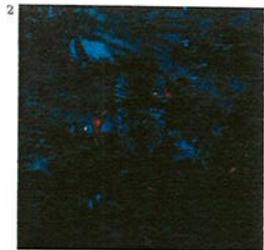
These and subsequent works on paper will be developed into paintings to be shown at the 2008 Melbourne Art Fair and for exhibitions at Gow Langsford Gallery in Auckland in late 2008 and Kaliman Gallery in Sydney in 2009.

Shane Cotton is represented by Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland; Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington; and Kaltman Gallery, Sydney.

Exhibition: Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington, from 19 Aug

#### melbourne art fair

Shane Cotton at Gow Langsford Gallery, Stand C39



1 *Dream Number 1* (2008) (detail), acrylic on canvas, 100 x 100 cm

2 *The Hanging Sky* (2008), acrylic on canvas, 265 x 265 cm

3 Shane Cotton in Woolloomooloo during his residency at Artspace, Sydney  
Opposite: *Painting (Blue Circle)* (2008), acrylic on canvas, 100 x 100 cm