MICHAEL PAREKOWHAI

The works of New Zealand artist Michael Parekowhai have charmed audiences and critics alike with their winning combination of spectacle and play (just ask anyone who encountered Cosmo, his seven-metre inflatable rabbit at the 2006 Melbourne Art Fair). But underneath the whimsy lie serious concerns regarding the implications of colonialism on the cultural climate of his home country

WORDS: *Sarah Hopkinson*

Kapa Haka (2008), *fibreglass, automotive paint, each 188 x 680 x 42cm*

Michael Parekowhai's most recent sculpture – soon to be unveiled at Sydney's Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery – is a group of ten boys dressed up as American Indians, each of whom contemplate the viewer with an impassive, slightly guilty gaze. Arms crossed over their chests, their posture is stooped – perhaps the war bonnets weigh a little too heavily on their heads, or maybe they've been caught doing something naughty in a backyard game. Their skin colour is purposefully indiscriminate, neither pale nor dark, and I couldn't help but notice that their identical features resemble the artist or, perhaps more closely, his two young sons.

When I spoke with Parekowhai about this new project, we discussed how, in the childhood game of Cowboys and Indians, he always wanted to be the Indian because the stereotype was so appealing – they were cunning, tough and reckless and, paradoxically, they usually "won". In games, victories are so complete and so satisfying in their isolation. The traditional end to Cowboys and Indians saw the Cowboys tied up and the Indians feverishly running around them in a whooping victory dance. Occasionally, the pistol-packing Cowboys overcame the Indians with an equally exaltant cry of "bang bang, you're dead," only for the game to start afresh with positions swapped.

However, one can't be fooled by these images of fun and mischief that Parekowhai conjures, nor by the bold, toy-land colours of his sculptures. Since the 90s Parekowhai has been appropriating familiar forms from modern art-history, popular culture and the tools of teaching and childhood play to question our methods of learning and socialisation in order to tease out the ideologies inscribed therein. In a game of Cowboys and Indians, regardless of who triumphs in make-believe, the character-types have a clarity and polarity bred of racial conflict and, as social-theorists tell us, these well-worn narratives function to establish and/or reinforce concepts such as justice and violence, strength, power and domination from a young age.

In Cowboys and Indians in particular, children act out an historical narrative that provides an uncomfortably close parallel with New Zealand's (and Australia's) own colonial legacy, but remains abstracted by geographical and historical distance. (Indeed, encountering Parekowhai's new work I was reminded of Gordon Bennett's 1990 painting – Self Portrait (But I Always Wanted to be One of the Good Guys) – in which he combines an image of himself as a child dressed in a cowboy suit standing in the "I" of a large Colin McCahon-style "I AM" over a background image of warfare between American Indians and a white army. Although the methodology and tone of Bennett's work differs from Parekowhai's, it reinforces the resonance of the Western narrative for both New Zealand and Australia colonial histories.)

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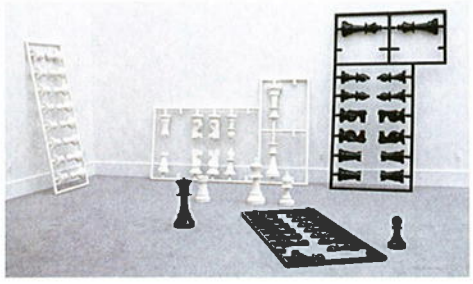

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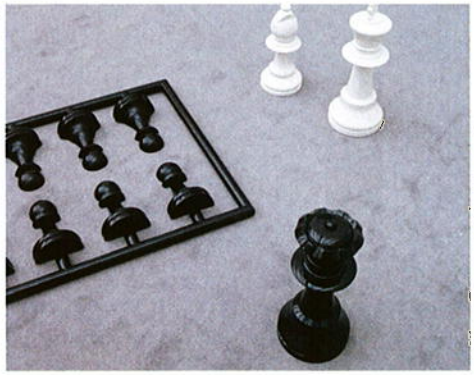

Courtesy Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth

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Courtesy Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth

1 & 2 **Folie à Deux** *(1994), wood, fibreglass, automotive paint, dimensions variable*

3 **Atarangi** *(1990), wood, laquer, 160 x 100 x 10cm*

Opposite: **The Indefinite Article** *(1990), wood, acrylic, dimensions variable*

The most pervasive figure of the "Indian" is in the genre of the Western – the Wild West being both a geographical and metaphorical location that served as the site of America's mythical roots. In films and literature alike, the classic formula of the Western incorporated three central roles from which all narrative possibilities derived. At the base are the townspeople who nurtured civilisation, then there were the "savages" or outlaws who threatened civilisation, and the heroes, who ultimately act against the second group for the good of the first group and greater humanity. Westerns are moralising tales, about responsibility and control, and in early films in particular, the indigenous inhabitants of the frontier were portrayed as part of the wildlife, in need of taming and conquering.

In a 2003 essay on the Americanisation of New Zealand culture, Cushla Parekowhai – Michael's sister and collaborator – discusses how in Aotearoa, Western films served as an "accessible metaphor for the abusive effects of white colonisation." The battle for the West, as in New Zealand, was, and continues to be, a battle for sovereignty – for autonomy and the right to self-determination. When sovereignty is lost the power of representation is also lost and groups (in this case, an indigenous colonised group) are characteristically denied a history, culture or identity of their own in favour of an image determined by the dominant culture for the consumption and benefit of that culture. These ideological discourses rely on representational images in the media, popular culture, literature and history to circulate, be reinforced and eventually become naturalised. Such images are predicated on an "otherisation" of a minority in relation to an idealised norm and give rise to ubiquitous stereotypes such as the "savage" African and "sinister" oriental. It's the subject position of "other" and its corresponding stereotype that children are given the opportunity to take on in role-play games such as Cowboys and Indians. Certain trajectories in post-colonial theory argued that, by definition, any subject/other relationship is inherently conflict-ridden because the only possibilities are dominance or domination – it does not account for movement or hybridity within these rigid polarities.

Images courtesy the artist and Michael Lett Gallery, The Indefinite Article courtesy Dunedin Public Art Gallery, collection: Jim Barr and Mary Barr

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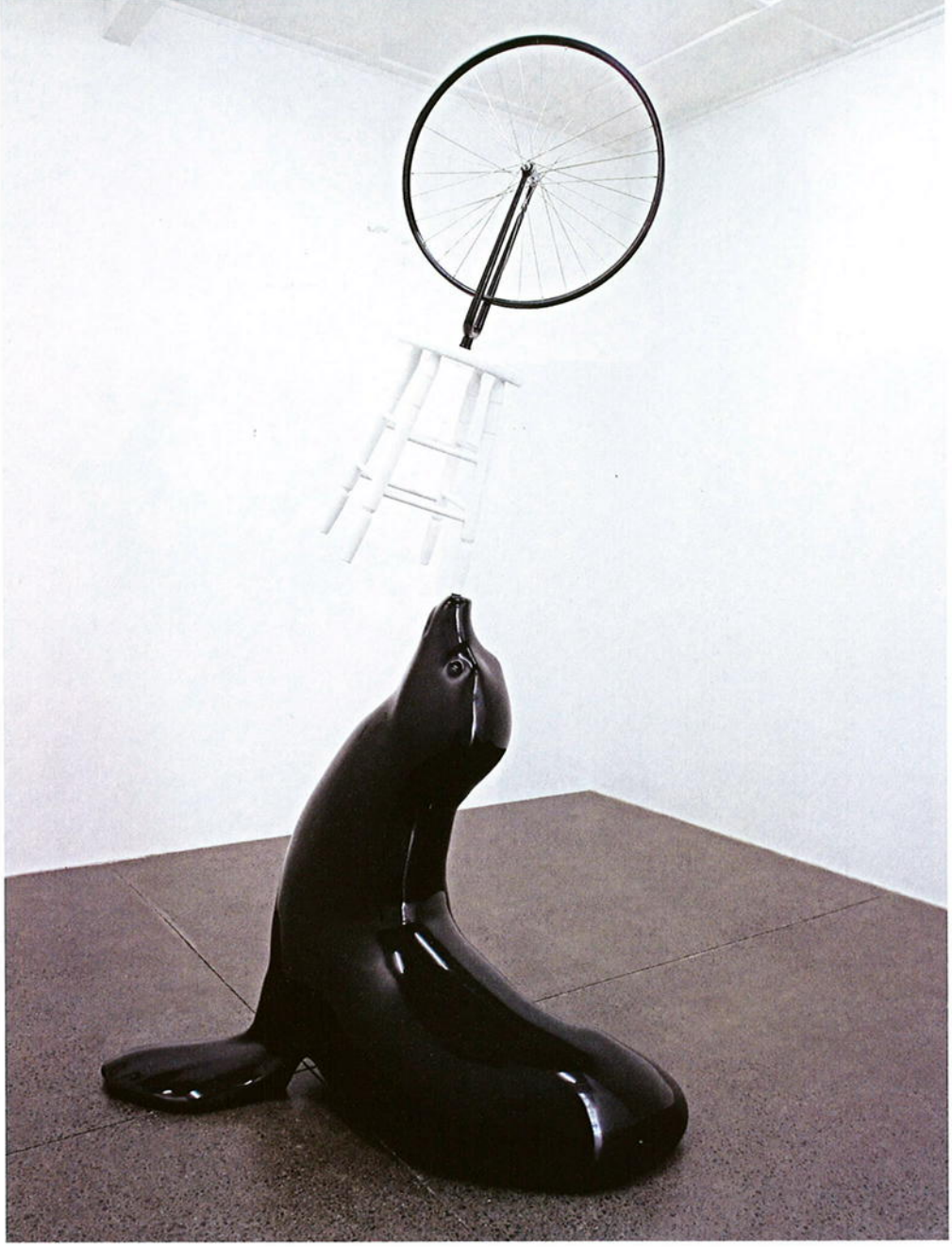
Images courtesy the artist and Michael Lett Gallery, Horn of Africa courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery



Opposite: **Horn of Africa** *(2006), wood, fibreglass, steel, brass, automotive paint, 395 x 200 x 260cm*

Left: **My Sister My Self** *(2006), fibreglass, mild steel, wood, automotive paint, 270 x 150 x 100cm*

1 **Cosmo** *(2006), woven nylon substrate, pigment, electrical components, kevlar, 734.3 x 506.4 x 739.1cm*

2 **Jim McMurtry** *(2004), woven nylon substrate, pigment, electrical components, 450 x 450 x 120cm*

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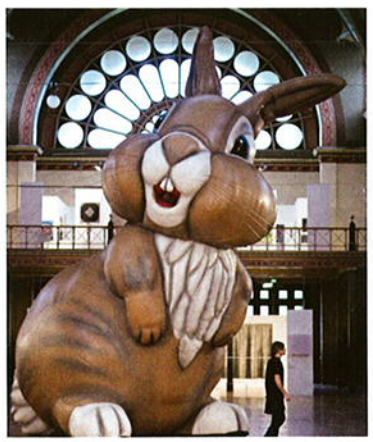

Collection: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

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Parekowhai's project is not a straightforward celebration or propagation of an undifferentiated Maori identity or experience, nor is it necessarily anti-colonial in its sentiment – it speaks to a far more slippery notion of selfhood and nationhood. Born of both Paheka and Maori descent, Parekowhai is well aware of the difficulties and contradictions of any oppositional binary, saying himself [in an essay by Justin Paton in the artist's 2007 monograph]: "It's not that I am here, and then I'm there. I'm in both places at any moment." This insistence on hybridity is particularly potent in Folie à Deux (1994), a work included in the artist's major exhibition of the same year, Kiss The Baby Goodbye, at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in New Plymouth. For this work Parekowhai produced giant kitset chess pieces that suggests the potential of clicking two halves of opposing colour together to form a composite. The title of the work, which translates literally as "a madness shared by two," further confuses the bipolarity of the strategic battle between black and white, symbolically suggesting a shared sense of responsibility in a nation struggling to come to terms with biculturalism.

In his early works of 1990 – Atarangi and The Indefinite Article – Parekowhai charted the metaphorical terrain of language, spinning stories around "introduced" forms that unfold into nuanced tales of influence and circularity. The Atarangi series borrows the form of Cuisenaire rods – teaching aids introduced and widely used in schools in second-half of the 20th century. Originally devised by a Belgian schoolteacher (after whom they are named) as a tool for solving mathematical equations, the brightly coloured rods were also adopted for teaching te reo Maori, the indigenous language of Aotearoa/New Zealand, a method called Te Atarangi. Te reo Maori is an oral, as opposed to written, language and its history is a turbulent one. Actively discouraged in schools for more than a century, the 80s saw the percentage of fluent te reo Maori speakers reduced to less than 20 per cent of the Maori population. After its re-instatement as an official language in 1987, Cuisenaire rods offered a compatible alternative to grammar-based methods of teaching Te reo Maori, relying on practical examples and social interaction between participants. For Atarangi (1990) and Atarangi II, a permanent sculpture in the grounds of Te Tuhi Centre for the Arts in Auckland (installed in 2005), Parekowhai enlarged the rods, using them both literally and symbolically as building blocks to create giant monuments that both mourn the ancestral language and commemorate its revival.

In The Indefinite Article chunky block letters spell out the phrase "I AM HE" – referencing the iconic "I AM" of one of New Zealand's most revered artists, Colin McCahon. As Justin Paton notes in his 2007 essay on Parekowhai's work, the apparent bravado and machoism of this

Images courtesy the artist and Michael Lett Gallery

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statement collapses as the bilingual meaning becomes apparent – in te reo Maori "he" is the indefinite article and in common usage functions as both "a" or "some." So, only when the viewer acknowledges a dual meaning can they unlock the multiplicity at the heart of Parekowhai's project: I am One and Many.

Like the oversized ballerinas of Song of the Frog (2005) and the immense seals of My Sister My Self (2006) and Horn of Africa (2006), and the hulking Maori security guards of Kapa Haka (2003 and 2008), The Indefinite Article is as much about the politics of sculpture and its ability to intrude on space as it is about socio-political resonance; in fact, the two are inextricable. Mimicking the idiosyncratic handwriting of McCahon (whose link to the land and fascination with a binary of light and dark has taken on mythic proportions in New Zealand's art-historical canon), The Indefinite Article lays claim to both physical and metaphorical space, opening out to a still-raging debate about land rights harking back to the discrepancies, centred around problems of translation, in New Zealand's "founding document", The Treaty of Waitangi.

In considering Parekowhai's work I'm reminded of African–American literary theorist Henry Louis Gates's discussion of the "trickster" figure in black oral tradition who repeatedly outwits the more powerful figure of the lion with a mixture of verbal guile and double-talk. No matter how bleak the crimes of history, Parekowhai favours wit and cunning over embittered cynicism, and there is playfulness at the heart of his project. His works are puzzles, aesthetically and intellectually pleasing conundrums that grant us a sense of complicit pleasure akin to that of a treasure hunt as we find clues in the smallest details, only for them to explode into seemingly endless chains of signification. As a viewer we are attracted by the alluring colours and seductive factory-finish surfaces, only to see our faces reflected back in them – our questions turned back on the asker.

The artist phoned me recently to tell me that he'd decided on a title and that the little Indians, as I'd been referring to them, are in fact The Brothers Grim. Like the famed authors referenced in their title, Parekowhai's little Indians tell us a story with universal appeal – they speak of the bewildering and conflicted process of self-definition in relation to the historical circumstances that shape current prejudices, and the ability of the "local" to take on mythical proportions. And, despite the purposeful exclusion of the final letter "m"– the phonetic inversion that turns Grimm the noun into grim the adjective – there is a hopefulness here. Not just because they are youthful, but because their number suggests that the "self" need not be fixed, that it can take many forms and wear many guises. The title also serves to remind us that their path will not be a lonely one because they are part of a family, a collective whole, and at once implicate us in their narrative, because it begins, quite literally, in our own backyard – every little Indian's own "western" frontier.

Exhibition: Michael Parekowhai, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, 23 Jul – 15 Aug

Michael Parekowhai is represented by Michael Lett, Auckland; and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

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Opposite: **Kapa Haka** *(2008), bronze, 185 x 68 x 42cm*

1 **Passchendaele, The Consolation of Philosophy: piko nei te mategna** *(2001), framed C-type print, 155 x 125cm*

2 **Boulougne, The Consolation of Philosophy: piko nei te mategna** *(2001), framed C-type print, 155 x 125cm*

3 **Kapa Haka** *(2008), fibreglass, automotive paint, each 188 x 680 x 42cm*