

MATAAHO: TABLEAUX WINDOWS ON APPROPRIATION

Anita DeSoto



Figure 1. Theodore Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa*, 1818-1819, oil on canvas, 4910 x 7160 mm.

This essay is a window on a project about windows looking into the past, the present and towards the future. The rafts we will see through these windows are metaphors for a current world adrift, and a vision for a new horizon, encouraging different perspectives. John Berger said: "Ours is the century of enforced travel ... of disappearances. The century of people helplessly seeing others, who were close to them, disappear over the horizon."¹ And again: "Globalization means many things. At one level, it talks of trade, which since the 16th century has exchanged goods and now, increasingly, ideas and information across the globe. But globalization is also a view of the world – it is an opinion about man and why men are in the world."²

'Tableau' is a French word meaning 'living picture.' It has been an historic framework in art-making for centuries, and a way of creating a narrative as if looking through a window on a moment in time. The tableau is the basis for my own art and directly informs my teaching practice. This method is currently taught as part of a collaborative team project to students at the Dunedin School of Art at Otago Polytechnic with the intention of inspiring dialogue and inquiry into Māori perspectives on art and social conscience.



Figure 2. Greg Semu, *The Raft of the Tagata Pasifika*, 2014-2016, digital C-Type print, edition of 5, 120 x 194 cm, image courtesy of Greg Semu and Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne.

In 2011, I first developed and delivered the Tableau Project, with a brief focusing on students developing a conceptual framework and visual skills in the discipline of observational and conceptual drawing. The brief was designed to give students a creative approach to looking at art history, the figure in context and the development of the concept of subversion (the attempt to transform the established social order and its structures of power, authority and hierarchy, values and morals). Also to be considered was the notion of the 'simulacrum' (a distorted copy of reality that becomes the truth in its own right) in contemporary art practice.

Students were given the time and space to gain the skills required to sustain an independent research program that actively informed their developing notion of a practice, including knowledge of contexts relevant to their personal studio practice. It was anticipated that students would engage at a more advanced level in critical dialogue and debate, as well as gain the skills and knowledge required to identify and, where appropriate, articulate connections between their own work and issues raised within the course in a generative and reflexive manner.

The assignment asked students to develop a "tableau" which, for all intents and purposes, meant that they could explore any idea they wished to pursue within the discipline of the historical framework they had chosen. For many students, this brief was timely, allowing them to pursue a personal topic or stylistic approach, whereas other students struggled with such broad parameters. Their initial hesitation was overcome by the usual methods of idea development through brainstorming, thumbnail sketches, preparatory drawings and researching other artists. This encouraged students to explore various approaches including landscape, portraiture, abstraction and the physical experience of theatre with models, costume and props.

The enquiry style of learning employed in this project was successful in helping students to feel inspired and appreciate the history of art and the foundational frameworks used by centuries of artists. It was also practical in advancing their drawing skills, at the same time as extending their ability to communicate ideas through their work in a way that was not literal, but intriguing. This project was so well received by the students that four years ago, my colleagues expanded its research and conceptual elements and it is now taught in a collaborative teaching team.

Among other things, this module has benefited the students in their understanding of a Māori perspective on art, and the relevance of Te Tiriti O Waitangi to any work they make. The Otago Polytechnic Māori Strategic Framework is applied in the classroom with the intention of acknowledging Māori values of wholeness, whanau, relationship, mana, sustainability and unity to build a creative community. According to educationalist Angus Macfarlane, "mapping the cultural terrain of education into the inaugural decade of this new millennium should explore a knowledge framework which continues to foster indigenous worldviews."¹³ The values and concepts, abilities and skills of Māori people, accumulated through many years of experience, learning and development, not only support Māori students and other ethnic groups but the entire class. The need to teach empathetically and compassionately to a diverse range of students, who are increasingly living on the social margins, is greater than ever. Not only are students located on the margins ethnically, but in terms of their sexual preferences, gender identity, mental health and learning difficulties.

Macfarlane's edu-cultural wheel model describes five cultural concepts and strategies that can be utilised to affirm Māori values relevant to teaching in practical ways:

1. Whanaungatanga: Building relationships, using cooperative learning, creating community, knowing your students' background, peer review, hospitality, teamwork and communication, sharing our personal art practice.
2. Manaakitanga: Practicing the ethics of caring, creating safe-haven classrooms, empathy and encouragement.
3. Rangatiratanga: Teacher effectiveness, assertiveness, 'with-it-ness', mana, presence, passion and enthusiasm, eye contact and open body language, using student-friendly vernacular, discipline, and acknowledging achievement.
4. Kotahitanaga: Ethics of bonding, offering whole-class incentives, whole-class or team agreements, perseverance, ritual.
5. Pūmanawatanga: Morale, tone and a vital pulse rippling out over all of the above.

It is always an ongoing challenge to foster these values. It is also part of my personal philosophy to think of the learner as my teacher:

As the students look at early colonial art and how Māori are often portrayed as 'noble savages' and a dying race, they learn how the history of art can, and has, objectified people. This has become a key level of inquiry in the project, and often Māori students take the opportunity to voice their opinions in the discussions. Some go on to make work that is about being Māori. The project broadens students' knowledge of cutting-edge artists in performance and installation and other conceptual art, as a result of the research they do on artists using the tableau as a framework.

Students research historical works such as *The Raft of the Medusa*, painted in 1818-19 by Théodore Géricault, based on the true story of a French shipwreck where the captain and crew were saved by lifeboats, while 147 passengers were cast adrift in a raft they made themselves. There were only 15 survivors to tell this story. Géricault's subject was highly politically sensitive, as it challenged the corrupt monarchy of the time who had employed the unqualified captain of the *Medusa*. By comparison, students research works such as *The Arrival of the Maoris in New Zealand* by colonial artists CF Goldie and LJ Steele circa 1889. In this work, Goldie and Steele directly appropriated the image of Géricault's raft. The painting was highly acclaimed at the time, but with no understanding of the excellent skills deployed by Māori navigating across the Pacific Ocean. It is one of many colonial paintings that misrepresent Māori. Now an icon of the Auckland Art Gallery, the work has polarised



Figure 3. C F Goldie and L J Steele, *The Arrival of the Maori in New Zealand*, 1898, oil on canvas, 1758 x 2825 mm.

public opinion; Māori people have censured its historically inaccurate depiction of Māori seafarers as emaciated victims desperately clinging to survival, rather than as skillful navigators on deliberate voyages of exploration.

Having researched this work, students are then asked to make their own contemporary response and are shown the work of contemporary artists in Aotearoa/New Zealand appropriating colonial work with the intention of challenging colonial perspectives.

Two artists in particular stand out in their attempts to transform the established social order and its structures of power; authority, hierarchy, values and morals.

Lisa Reihana is a Māori artist exhibiting in this year's Venice Biennale. According to Rhana Devenport of the Auckland Art Gallery, Reihana's 2015 work in *Pursuit of Venus [infected]*

registers the world premiere of one of the most ambitious screen-based projects from Aotearoa New Zealand, from one of the country's most admired artists. In 1804, Joseph Dufour created *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique*, a sophisticated 20-panel scenic wallpaper whose exotic subject matter referenced popular illustrations of the times and mirrored a widespread fascination with Captain Cook and de la Perouse Pacific voyages. Two hundred years later Lisa Reihana reanimates this popular wallpaper as a panoramic video spanning a width of 26 metres.

While Dufour's work models Enlightenment beliefs of harmony amidst mankind, Reihana's version includes encounters between Polynesians and Europeans which acknowledge the nuances and complexities of cultural identities and colonization.

Stereotypes about other cultures and representation that developed during those times and since are challenged, and the gaze of imperialism is returned with a speculative twist that disrupts notions of beauty, authenticity, history and myth.⁴

Like Reihana, Greg Semu uses the tableau on a panoramic scale. Both play with the relationship between photography and painting; if Reihana's work looks like film turned into painting, Semu's looks like painting turned into film.

Judith Ryan of the National Gallery of Victoria describes Semu thus:

Interdisciplinary artist Greg Semu was born and raised in Auckland, Aotearoa / New Zealand and is of Samoan heritage. Themes of people's movement between territories and cultural authority inform his practice, and the impact of colonial occupation and introduction of Christianity on indigenous cultures across the Pacific is a major subject of his work. By referencing and re-imagining epic European history paintings, Semu parodies their portrayal of First Nations people, which he interprets 'as crude concoctions of myth and romanticism.' His work challenges accepted history by substituting European narratives of settlement with those that survive in Pacific oral histories.

Semu's *The Raft of the Tagata Pasifika (People of the Pacific)*, 2014–16, focuses on the two celebrated nineteenth-



Figure 4. Lisa Reihana, *In Pursuit of Venus [infected]* (still), 2015.

century European history paintings: Louis John Steele and Charles F. Goldie's *The Arrival of the Māoris in New Zealand*, and Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*, both of which dramatize survival at sea. While growing up in Auckland, Semu was captivated by the beauty, pain and suffering of *The Arrival of the Māoris in New Zealand*.

The illumination of the light boxes in Semu's *The Raft of the Tagata Pasifika (People of the Pacific)* finds its roots in the classical European chiaroscuro painting technique used to create dramatic visual effects of light and shadow and to delineate forms emerging out of atmospheric darkness. A consideration of great European Old Master paintings in the Louvre gave Semu the idea to digitally recreate their radical perspective and heroic compositions so the viewer could become involved in the narrative – extending the action beyond the surface of the painting and into the viewer's space.⁵

Both artists have created interpolated narratives that turn the imperial gaze back onto itself and, using new digital technology, explore the two-centuries-old renderings of European colonialism and its ongoing stereotypes. Their work disrupts notions of beauty, authenticity and history and uncovers myth-making.

My own art practice focuses on the tableau aimed at the invocation of memory and pathos around the intergenerational history of women once marginalised but now re-valued. Connecting earlier paintings with contemporary works utilising the tableau unlocks the critical potential of this narrative device that enables “gestures that matter” in the socio-political context of contemporary art practice.

Since ancient times, artists have asked themselves how they might influence the politics of the world through peaceful protest in their work. This is the baton offered to the students, to carry the hope of changed perspectives. As teachers of this project and teachers anywhere, we have the opportunity to show compassion in our daily work with students and how that manifests one on one. Respecting difference and asking questions of one another go a long way in the classroom and outside on the world political stage. With this in mind, we can take hope that it was a minority group that abolished slavery, and that the suffragettes were a minority group who won the right to vote for women. A minority group changed US civil rights. With aroha, the tide can turn.



Figure 5. Anita DeSoto, *Untitled (Girl Juggling)*, 2016, oil on aluminum 1000 × 800 mm.



Figure 6. Anita DeSoto, *Untitled (Woman Running with Dog)*, 2017, oil on aluminum, 1000 × 800 mm.

New Zealand artist **Anita DeSoto** lives in Waitati, Dunedin, and has been exhibiting nationally and internationally for the last 13 years. She has a Master of Fine Arts and has been lecturing in drawing and painting at the Dunedin School of Art, Otago Polytechnic, since 2004. Her recent work focuses on the tableau as a narrative device deployed in figurative painting to portray historical events and the re-interpretation of such events, thus opening windows on appropriation as well as on nostalgia, memory and pathos.

- 1 John Berger; "Ev'ry Time we Say Goodbye," in *Selected Essays of John Berger* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).
- 2 John Berger; "A Tragedy the Size of the Planet," *The Guardian*, 28 May 2001, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2001/may/28/artsfeatures.globalisation>.
- 3 Angus H Macfarlane, "Strategies for Teachers," in *Kia hiwa ra! Listen to Culture* (Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 2004), 63.
- 4 <https://www.aucklandartgallery.com/whats-on/exhibition/in-pursuit-of-venus-infected>.
- 5 <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/greg-semu-the-raft-of-the-tagata-pasifika-people-of-the-pacific-2014-16/>.