

IN PURSUIT OF MEANING: MANA AND THE SGEULACHD GHAISGE¹: THE WORK OF WARWICK MCLEOD

Kura Puke

Pakaitore, stretched between Whanganui's hill and the *awa* below, still retained, in the year 2000, its salience, as another seven years would pass before its return to *iwi* ownership in 2007. The habitation of Pakaitore in 1995 not only set the path for *iwi* consolidation by the *mana whenua*, Te Ati Hau Nui a Paparangi, but it created an opportunity for wider Whanganui to begin to build a stronger cultural identity. Pakaitore marked a decade when awareness of Pakeha and Maori worldviews became discussed increasingly, with many in the Aotearoa community engaging in meaningful dialogue, with an often brutal honesty. It was a time of self-reflection; a heady time for the focus of cultural awareness and the refashioning of a bicultural identity – marked by, along with Pakaitore, such maturing events as the construction of Te Papa, literature such as Michael King's *Pakeha: The Quest for Identity in New Zealand*, and the films Jane Campion's *Piano* and Lee Tamahori's *Once were Warriors*. Out of this dialogue came an enhanced recognition of the colonial plight of all, but also the importance of dignity, of roots, of *turangawaewae*: of acknowledgement of the vast ancestral lines attached to any individual.

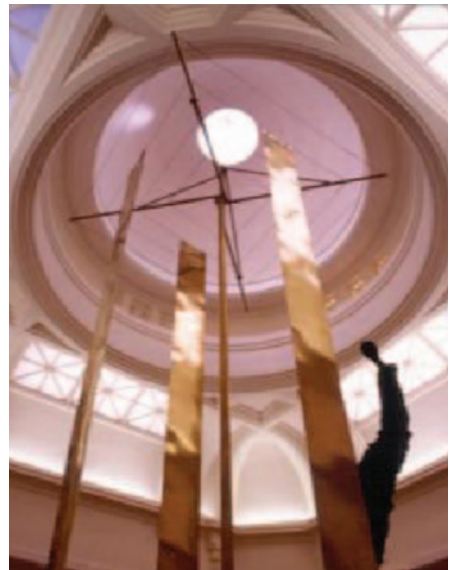


Figure 1. Warwick McLeod, *Sons of Leod* (2005, detail).
Aratoi Wairarapa Museum of
Art and History, Masterton.

Figure 2. Warwick McLeod, *The Prophet and the Birdman*
(2000). Sargeant Gallery, Whanganui.

As vividly as other events in Whanganui at that time, I remember an exhibition on the hill above Pakaitore. In the year 2000 Warwick McLeod's installation *The Prophet and the Birdman* featured in the central dome of the Sargeant Gallery, while *Sons of Leod* occupied the same gallery's north hall. This latter installation kept watch with giant wooden toes digging into and over large rocks, and leathery bull-kelp hands and heads presented on booms above them; while beneath the dome the Prophet's arms hung from a 6-metre-high washing line, as sleek suspended strips of brass terminating in open-palm hands. On the periphery loomed the Birdman, a tall but grounded figure standing vigil like a votive authority.

These installations were visual storytelling; ballads in the rhythms and tones of lost languages. They were tribal, organic and raw; looser notions tied up with intricate and refined elements of visual contemplation, constantly sprouting unfurling iterations and deviations of characters, events and situations.

McLeod was born in New Zealand, with descent tracing back to the mid-nineteenth-century settlement at Waipu by the followers of Reverend Norman McLeod: Gaelic people who had been the kelp-gatherers of the Hebrides before their crisscrossing of the Americas and the Pacific.



Figure 3. Warwick McLeod, *Sons of Leod* (2000, detail). Sargeant Gallery, Whanganui.

Like the Greek *Odyssey* or the tales of the Fianns from the Gaelic Fenian cycle, McLeod's works are poems that delve into the psychology or the inner spaces of this epic journey and its characters.

McLeod is a student of medieval Celtic literature, but these installations are not literal narratives; rather the elements of epic or heroic sensibilities resonate within the work. McLeod brings an embodiment of that psychology to life, in the understanding of its ways, intent, intuition and genetic drive to realise a need.

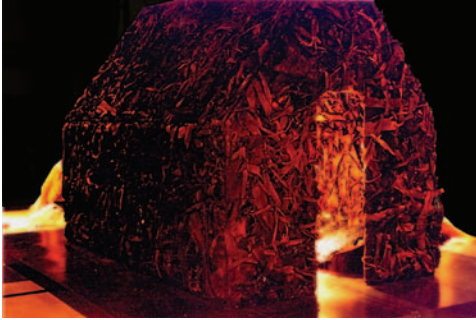


Figure 4. Warwick McLeod, *Knot* (2005). Aratoi Wairarapa Museum of Art and History, Masterton.



Figure 5. Warwick McLeod, *Knot* (2005, detail). Aratoi Wairarapa Museum of Art and History, Masterton.

McLeod's 2005 installations, at Lopdell House Gallery and Aratoi Wairarapa Museum of Art and History, featured sculptural works such as the bull-kelp whare *Knot*, the kelp, wood, and stone *Sons of Leod*, and *Be Ye A Brazen Wall*. *Be Ye A Brazen Wall* is a grand brass sculpture, made up of a series of sleek cupboards opening into vistas or cavities of prophetic lands and perhaps dreamlike states, of varying perspectives and scale. Doors open into both intimate and panoramic situations, some featuring mechanically driven figurative movements and musical tunes. The figures move smoothly, whisking through at varying pace, compounding multidimensional time and space. These works are powerfully absorbing and experiential – reminiscent of the doors of the remarkable medieval Hildesheim Cathedral in Germany.



Figure 6. Warwick McLeod, *Be Ye A Brazen Wall* (2005). Aratoi Wairarapa Museum of Art and History, Masterton.



Figure 7. Warwick McLeod, *Be Ye A Brazen Wall* (2005, detail). Aratoi Wairarapa Museum of Art and History, Masterton.

I have seen earlier cycles in the journey of McLeod's characters in exhibitions of his paintings and etchings at Gallery Fifty2 in 2006, and at WHMilbank Gallery and Chaffers Gallery in 2008. In July 2011 McLeod exhibited their most recent cycle, with his first New York solo show at InRivers Gallery in Williamsburg.

The paintings are luminous; spacious, but thickly atmospheric, with figures asserting form and weight. Soft, densely mixed planes delineated by minimal, refined marks create intriguing canvases. The characters are somehow ludicrous, almost caricatures of the strong but maimed, troubled, and incomplete – what McLeod calls 'vestiges of people,' their remnants as heads, hands and feet. They have tasks to perform. To fulfil their tasks they reassemble themselves, or reassemble each other. One character must make a hearth; another must make a washing line; another character has his hands tied to the end of a bandage wrapped around his head and ankles.

The figures are poignant, reminding me foremost of narratives surrounding some Maori prophets, in their stages of initial realisation: characters uniting a disparate group, alienated together as they, alone, must accept their fate; heeding the signs and accomplishing their tasks.

McLeod conveys this through the main character's physical solidness, moving within the spacious but psychologically visceral canvas plane. The figurative solidity feels like a great weight, heavy with the responsibility of the knowledge, and with the challenge of the journey. The journey is as much a mental discipline and a psychological exertion as it is physical action. These actions require the collective – and it is in the devising of their strategies that they will shift their outcome to forward their situation. But it is in the performance of the tasks that the creative cultural meanings spring out: and hence the light, rich hues, clean spaces and finishing highlights. These are visual narratives of the process of complex projects, through journeys filled with strife and insight, problems and milestones.

The characters become more intriguing, but still both odd and familiar. They tell me a little about myself as I observe them, studying the performance of their tasks, finding a new angle. They pay for the consequences of their actions and then move on, meditative, dutiful, familiar; always ready with an eye to maneuver a situation.

What is the situation? My imagination flits between images of the bleak, rocky, northern Scottish isles and the migration out, some landing here in Aotearoa, where perhaps for European immigrants the forgotten genealogy is held mutely in the repositories of mannerisms, or tactics, or aesthetics, but never explicitly addressed. In line with the odysseys of Homer and ancient Ireland, the main character must return to his rightful land and people, accompanied by the constant resurrection of the ancestors: their names, their deeds, their land.

In these paintings, Iron Age and postmodernism meet in a multiplicity of signs and genres from today's vocabulary. In witness of our current situation, termed 'technoculture,' we are involved in the shaping of relationships between humans and technology, forming a vast and interconnected global network,



Figure 8. Warwick McLeod, *Murder* (2006), oil on tin.



Figure 9. Warwick McLeod, *Rider* (2008), oil on canvas.



Figure 10. Warwick McLeod, *Mervin and the Pig* (2011), oil on canvas.

with a majority of us immersed in this disembodied virtual reality. To me, engaging in McLeod's work at first feels like remembering a pre-digital era, where ancestor remembrance seems to be at odds with the emergent technoculture. McLeod is a consummate artist and journeying poet. Very quickly, I realise how easily I take for granted my tribal connections that hold me firmly to the land, to whichever part of the land that life takes us.

There is little surety we can really have for ourselves, except that of where you have come from. It is the resilience of the remembering of a vast lineage that ensures global kinship, sustainability, and respect, no matter how noisy or crowded our data-filled world. The implication of knowing your genealogy is that you have *mana* and therefore must act accordingly.



Figure 11. Warwick McLeod, *Burial* (2011), oil on canvas.

Kura Puke Te Ati Awa and Ngati Pakeha, is an artist and educator. He is a lecturer at the College of Creative Arts at Massey University in Wellington. Kura has worked with paint and glass with a focus on light transmission, colour and *matauranga Maori*. Since 2005, he has worked primarily with light-emitting diodes, fibre optics and software, with a strong conceptual content pertaining to Indigenous visual culture. Recent exhibitions include "Muramura," first shown in the Pataka Museum of Art and Culture in Porirua (2008) and subsequently at Puke Ariki in New Plymouth (2009) and Te Manawa in Palmerston North (2009-10).

Kura is actively involved in two research groups: 'WATT', which recently hosted the Wellington Lux symposium, and SuRe Sustainability research network. Kura participates in the Nga Aho Network of Maori Design Professionals and Te Atinga: Contemporary Visual Arts network.

Warwick McLeod is a senior lecturer in the School of Design at Victoria University of Wellington. He read Medieval Studies at the University of Toronto, and Painting at Krakow Academy of Fine Art, at Massachusetts College of Art and at Yale University.

I 'Sgeulachd ghaisce' translates as 'legends of heroes' or 'heroic tales'.