SELF IN THE SHADOW OF THE TOHUNGA

This year my 'Archibald' painting celebrates my recent 60th birthday, 40 years as an exhibiting artist and over 20 years involvement with the Archibald prize for portraiture. It is also intended to correspond with my exhibition at the Boutwell Draper gallery, 11 March – 17 April 2010, where I will show a body of work related to this piece. I have previously won the 'People's choice' three times and was 2009 winner of the 'packing room prize'.This painting upholds my contention that an artists subject is always more important than the artist, hence the title and my placement of self sitting upon the shoulder of the tohunga. This simulacrum of a tohunga is an amalgam of many previous paintings that have characterized a large portion of my subjective interests. This is a portrait of myself and may be so in another sense in that it represents the thing with which I most identify. Although I am Australian, I was born in New Zealand amongst my Maori and Tongan brothers. My paternal grandmother was Tongan.

This painting is not the rumination of polite society or an historical record, but the incomprehensible meeting the implacable. This is a reawakening of the gaze of first contact with pakeha (non-Maori) where the 'ploughed' and resolute visage of the tohunga's face, presages, with the edginess of a wasp, the end of a feudal and arcane society. He has known and survived conflict and the retirement of old age. Here I engage morphological equivalency and distortion, contrariness, visual conceit and juxtaposition, wrestling in the 'arena of difficulty' awaiting a 'face-off' between the chosen subject and the viewer.

As Maori were not portraitists in the conventional European sense, all imagery herein, with a few exceptions, is therefore post-European. Maori equivalents of 'portraiture' may be seen in the carvings that embody the fingers, the pounamu (greenstone) Hei-tiki, hanging from the neck and most importantly the moko (tattoo) upon the face.

The culture of the moko should not be mistaken for the tattoo carried upon the bodies of today but is an arcane record of lineage, status and accession. There were various levels that a tohunga might achieve throughout his life. These teachings are sadly mostly lost to Maori youth and replaced by American hip hop where the needle, in more ways than one, replace the Albatross bone chisels of the tattooist's art.

The procedure to make a suitable black for facial moko involved the burning of Kauri and White- Pine resin or Kapara. Awe or soot made from the burning of Awheto or vegetable caterpillar (Sphinx Convolvuli) was considered only suitable for body moko. These pigments, being sacred were highly prized. Men chosen for this task were, for that

time, tapu (inaccessible; sacred) where neither food nor any other thing was allowed to be handled as this rendered them unusable by others. Fine Wharanui flax meshes were placed over a kiln vent to entrap the rising smoke and soot. After the especially prepared kiln or Ruangarehu had cooled and the carboniferous matter collected from scabrous mesh fibres, it was then mixed with bird fat. Maori dogs, which had hitherto been fasted, were fed the mixture. Bird oil and water were kneaded with the dog's evacuated faeces. The spiral lines or Koru were chiselled deeply into the flesh including lips and eyelids causing tremendous pain. No truly accomplished chieftain would cry out or give sign of distress. The cicatrices achieved in the flesh are a far cry from the pretty coloured tattoos found on the 'bodies beautiful' in your local gym.

Due to interference of Christian missionary zeal and 'European nationalization', male moko practice ceased in its traditional form after 1865. Female moko practice however took on new genealogical and social importance with the Maori style of Christianity; Paimarire and Ringatu being examples. In the early twentieth century Rua Kenana, a self styled mihaia (messiah) askewed the moko tradition for a new 'Christian' order.

The hat in my painting is based on Rua's hat and its band pattern is from a design painted upon Rua's meeting-house; Hiona (Maori for Zion or Heaven).It should be noted here that Rua did not have the moko as this would have contradicted his teachings. The clubs on the hat band, derived from playing cards, for Rua, represented the father son and Holy spirit. The diamond represents a mythical diamond at the heart of Maungapohatu mountain where Hiona was located. Other European clothing was embrace by Maori in the 19th century which bought about health problems such as tuberculosis, measles and typhoid due to the unfamiliarity with its poor weather protection. The climate on New Zealand's mountainous regions is extremely harsh in winter and Maori resistance to European diseases was low.

I have employed a technique more common to printmakers in the painting of the tweed coat's fabric. Through successive layers of white paint, as employed by the Grisaille painters of the 16th.Century, I was able to simulate course fabric with a succession of makeshift canvas blocks. As the 'print blocks' were pulled away from the paintings surface a 'peaked' paint surface was deposited. A final series of scumbles and glazes rendered a surface like that of fabric. All other parts, hands and artefacts are painted with the grisaille technique in order to make them appear more orthogonal. For me there are some similarities between the optical refraction effect of the grisaille and moko under the skin.

A Mako shark's tooth hanging from the left ear is clearly post –European as the red portion of the tooth is red sealing wax introduced by the postal service to seal letters. Maori employed it to attach the tooth to black ribbon and to adhere the shell eyes of the Hei-tiki. It took the place of natural Kauri resin. Also hanging from the right ear is the tail feather of the now extinct Huia.

HUIA
(Heteralocha acutirostris)

The visit of the Duke and Duchess of York, later King George V and Queen Mary to New Zealand in 1901, was celebrated throughout the land and at an official Maori welcome in Rotorua. A Maori guide took a Huia feather from her hair and placed it in the band of the Duke's hat as a token of respect. This action is the premise for the painting called *The Tohunga 2009.* The question here arises whether the faux chieftain's gaze is diffidence to the royal visitor or resignation to the fate of his own culture and the demise of the Huia? Soon many people in England and New Zealand wanted to emulate this royal fashion and wear Huia feathers in their hats. The price of feathers was soon pushed to

one New Zealand pound each and some sold for as high as five pounds. Shooting season notices ceased, listing the Huia as a protected species in 1901 and a last-ditch attempt to reinforce government protection failed when the Solicitor General ruled that there was no law to protect feathers. Although the Huia's range was restricted to the southern North Island of New Zealand, its feathers were valued highly and were exchanged amongst tribes for other valuable goods such as greenstone and shark teeth or given as tokens of friendship and respect. Through this trade, the feathers reached the far north and the far south of the country. They were stored in intricately carved boxes called *waka huia* which were hung from the ceilings of chief's houses. Huia feathers were worn at funerals and on other important occasions and were used to decorate the heads of the deceased. The *marereko*, described by Tregear as an 'ancient war-plume' consisted of twelve Huia feathers. The *pōhoi*, an ornament made from the skin of the Huia, was highly valued. The

bird was skinned with the beak, skull and wattles attached, while the legs and wings were removed. The skin was carefully dried and the resulting *pōhoi* ornament was worn from the neck or ears. In Māori culture, only persons of high rank wore Huia feathers. In some legends, the Huia was one of the birds attained from the heavens by Tāwhaki so that his wife could decorate her hair with its feathers. This celestial origin meant that the feathers were treated with the greatest respect. As both the female and male Huia were reliant on each other for their mutual feeding, due to the great difference of their beak shapes, to kill one was to kill its mate and so the bird’s extinction was inevitable. The last confirmed sighting was on 28 December 1907 when W.W. Smith saw three birds in the Tararua Ranges. Further credible sightings were reported as late as 1922. It is interesting that the Huia found its last refuge in the ranges as did Rua at Maungapohatu. As the New Zealand government has passed a law allowing an attempt to clone and therefore return the Huia to its rightful place in the biosphere, are we to suppose that there is also a renewable place for ancient Maori belief ritual?