

ROSS T SMITH | HOKIANGA









HOKIANGA

Ross T. Smith's *Hokianga* focuses on Maori at a Maori place. Young Maori are at the heart of this remarkable project, and it is their lives which encouraged its beginnings. They met the artist and their mutual trust helped the project gain its direction. *Hokianga* provokes the relationships which exist between Maori and photography, and it seeks to bring them closer together in a direct and creative connection. The project challenges us to look and to feel how ethnicity, identity and culture are combined within the life of an isolated rural community.

Ross T. Smith returned to New Zealand in 1995, after a twelve year absence. He settled in Melbourne and worked there as an Intensive Care Nurse. The New Zealand that he was coming home to was entirely different from the nation that he had left. New Zealand had experienced sufficient cultural tension that it was starting to learn from its past. Smith wanted to discover the unique spirit of Hokianga by living there, and he recognised that it was the home place of his Ngapuhi ancestors.

While in Melbourne, Smith began a new career and undertook tertiary training in fine art photography. He soon gained freelance work as a photographer, while at the same time developing his own projects. His *Tender Bruise* series of 1994-95 took as its starting point the tensions around the physical portrayal of urban males, where the men's body language conveys much more than a simple delineation of personal character. Back in New Zealand another camera project had to happen and this was the artistic reason behind Smith's return.

Intuition led him to the Hokianga. He did not know anyone there. He had been given the name of a person who took him into her home until he found a place to live at Waima. This was the base from which he drove hundreds of kilometres exploring Hokianga. After months of isolation and aloneness he recognised the essence of what he was attempting to achieve.

He started to learn the traditional craft of weaving harakeke (flax). This gave the artist and the community a way to know and relate to each other. He was living in a place which a century ago had been a key site for kotahitanga (tribal unity). Right from the outset Smith knew that his photographic project would become known as *Hokianga*. This is one of the Maori names for both the huge harbour and the land surrounding it and which can be freely translated as "the returning place".

Hokianga is a large and determined work where a complex progression of photographs have an intense and unequivocal relationship one with another. It is built up from a concentrated series of colour images that have as their origin and focus the lives of young Hokianga Maori women and men. The artist introduced himself to the subjects that he was interested in photographing. Trust was gained quickly and often a photographic session occurred. The 30 one-metre square photographs are not arranged as a sequence of separate and uniquely personal portraits, but are all part of one mural-scaled installation where everyone and every place share an awareness of each other. This sequence exists as a visual declaration which celebrates and confronts the lives of young Hokianga Maori. This project was never intended to exist as an ethnography of Maori culture or even as a visual anthropology of contemporary Maori society. It cannot be classified or labelled as a documentary photo-essay; because each image is inextricably in a visual conversation with all the other images.

Hokianga is a passionate presentation of how the realities of whanau and location can be conveyed in terms of visual art. This project is affirmative and honest, immediate and disquieting, tough and tender. Here, the sensual and the sexual dimension of these young adults is totally apparent. It is very likely that the portraits will one day become a resource for the descendants of the young people here. Such a genealogic future is not the reason why *Hokianga* exists, for Smith would like the project to be experienced by a diversity of viewers. While it has a pacific, elegiac mood it also demands the recognition that these people are actually the living



reflections of Hokianga tupuna (ancestors). The entire expression of this project is serious, humane and intimately informed by the journey of experience into becoming an adult.

From its first beginnings *Hokianga* has been an entirely self-initiated, self-determined, self-motivated and self-directed project. Smith wanted to expose images that would have the potential to express meaning and feeling as being woven inside each other. The project has a clear goal: every image affirms that identity and perception are mirrors of each other. If you are Maori this project speaks to you in a confronting voice. Pakeha and Maori interpret images in many dissimilar ways, especially when presented with a visual linkage between whenua, moana and Maori. Land, sea and people cannot be separated from the project's aspirations to reveal an emotion-filled continuity between past and future.

Smith has an intuitive comprehension of the ways in which identity can represent reality as a pictorial story 'written' by the eyes, the heart, and the mind of those who perceive it. *Hokianga* exists as a tableau where darkness and light surrounds these young Maori. With the Polynesian confidence that comes from living within one's own body, these young women and men express more than mere descriptive representations of what they look like. Their physical being, and the way they live and move in space, is a spontaneous affirmation of their identity. Just as Maori is a language that can be heard, so is Maori a language of the body which can be seen.

The atmosphere of day and of night occurs simultaneously in many of these photographs. Time has stretched so that a momentary exposure has the power to register much more than itself. The marae at night is very dark against the adjacent hills but the beacon of light still lets us know that people are inside the whareniui (house). It is at such hopeful places that Ross T. Smith saw his *Hokianga* project become the place of his own returning.

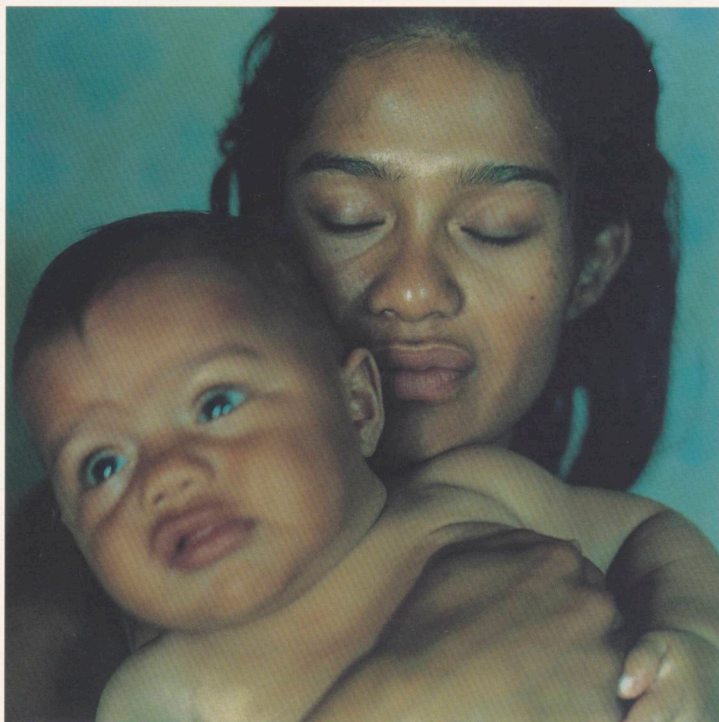
Ron Brownson
Curator



Ross T. Smith
(born 16 November 1961)
New Zealand

HOKIANGA 1997-98
30 colour prints
1000 x 1000mm

HOKIANGA
is a gift of Harriet Friedlander
to Auckland Art Gallery
Toi o Tamaki



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