

Brett Graham

MOENGA ROA

IF YOU DELVE DEEPLY ENOUGH, THINGS WILL
DECLARE THEMSELVES

Ngahiraka Mason
INDIGENOUS CURATOR, MĀORI ART

BRETT GRAHAM is a serious and 'cool' personality— as in Māori film director Lee Tamahori meets Wellington's fine-act band 'TrinityRoots' cool. A traditionalist when it comes to explaining things to his audiences Graham likes to prove things to himself. A high achiever and model child, Brett is confessional, in a caring way. His knowledge and practice of indigenous Māori concepts such as manaaki (putting others first) are exemplary. Graham is outstanding at extrapolating tough conflicts and emotions, because to him, feelings are strong things. His recent art explores pre-quel and sequel events in New Zealand's social history and if you delve deep enough, things will declare themselves. All 'cultural developments' come filled with struggle, surreal outcomes, love, tragedy, celebration and loss, and Brett Graham's art explores all of these issues. Although Colonial history is psychologically murky from an indigenous perspective, that which emerges from the shadows might actually present as hope for a yet-to-be-spoken-about future.

The terms Indigenous Māori and Pākehā (a white New Zealander descendant from Colonial settlers) are distinct to Aotearoa New Zealand. They identify two groups of people that are inextricably linked— stuck with each other for better, for worse. For the most part conflicting but self-preserving social and political ideologies have driven Māori Pākehā relationship to many extremes. Add Colonial Government assimilation policies and New Zealand's peculiar style of biculturalism to the

association and the country's social and political fabric starts to question everyone's identity and world-view. Some New Zealand made films that speak to this burden in differing ways are the part-documentary, part-constructed and part-authenticating productions such as *The Piano* 1993 (Director Jane Campion), *In Spring One Plants Alone* 1981 (Director Vincent Ward), *Heavenly Creatures* 1994 (Director Peter Jackson) and *Once were Warriors* 1994 (Director Lee Tamahori).

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MOENGA ROA NĀ BRETT GRAHAM

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KĪHAI I rite te titiro a te Māori me te Pākehā ki tō raua iwitanga me ngā take e whakatauria ai te iwi o te tangata. Kīhai anō hoki i rite ngā kōrero tuku iho mai i te taenga mai o te Pākehā. Ki te āta mātaingia te tū a te tangata me ngā whakaaro kua toka ki roto i a ia – koia terā ko te hoki whakamuri ki ngā mahi a te Māori me te Pākehā i roto i ngā rautau ka taha, tērā ka maea ake ko ngā tūmanako mō ngā rā kei te tū kāore anō i āta kōrerohia.

Ko tā Brett Graham (Ngāti Koroki Kahukura) he whāwhā haere i ngā taukumekume a te Māori me te Pākehā i roto i tana mahi toi *Moenga Roa* ka whakaaturia ā te Mahuru ki te New Gallery. Ko te mahi toi nei he moenga, he urunga me te hīti kua hangā ki te kirihou. He taputapu tara-a-whare katoa ēnei, ā, tērā pea ka pōhēhētia he toro haere, he whakaputa whakaaro rānei tā ngā taputapu nei mō te kākanorua, te tuakiritanga o te Māori me te Pākehā me tēnei mea te iwitanga. Ki te whāia haerehia tēnei whakaaro, kei whakaitia te hāngaitanga o te moenga, te urunga me te hīti hei whakarite, hei whakatinana rānei. i ēnei tūāhua.

Kia hoki ki te kupu rongonui i puta i te kaimātai manu, i a Tā Walter Lawry Buller pēnei nā, “heoi te mea ka taea ko te whakamāene i te urunga a te iwi taihoa ka whatungarongaro”. (“all we can do is smooth the pillow of a dying race”). E tohu ana te kōrero nei i te whakaaro whānui o te rautau rua tekau, arā, kua tata whare ngaro te iwi Māori. Kia āta tirohia anō te ‘moenga’ nei. Ka takoto te kōrero a tērā o ngā māngai o te ao Māori, a Ranginui Walker pēnei nā, “e tau ana ngā taupatu i waenganui i te Māori me te Pākehā i ngā moenga o te motu”. (“the differences from our Colonial past are being settled in the bedrooms of the nation”).¹ He whakakitenga tēnei nō tētahi mahi rangahau o ngā tau ono tekau, arā, tata ki te rima tekau ōrau te maha o ngā Māori i moe Pākehā. (Kāore a Brett Graham i rerekē ake i te tini Māori noho ki ngā taone – he Pākehā te whaea, he Māori te matua.) Arā anō hoki te kōrero a Tā Apirana Ngata e takoto mai rā i ngā whakamārama o te pukapuka tuatahi o Nā Tō Hoa Aroha, pēnei nā, “Me noho iwikore rawa tātou ka mate atu i ngā takuahi o ā tātou ipō, ā tātou tāne Pākehā, kia whakahīhi ai te iwi mangarū o ngā rā kei te tū ki ō

rātou tātai heke iho i ngā atua o Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa, kia rere ai he toto hou ki te iwi whakawhenua tangata nei, ki te Pākehā”. (“Must we languish and die by the hearths of our Pākehā lovers and husbands, that the mongrel race of the future may boast a long descent from the Gods of the Pacific, that may be added to the all conquering, all devouring Anglo-Saxon a fresh strain of blood”).²

He pouaka ahoaho te hīti o *Moenga Roa*, e whakamārama ana i ngā wāhi maha i whakaingoatia anō e te Pākehā, tae atu ki te maunga tapu o Ngāti Awa, i Mātaatua waka, i whakaingoatia anō i te tau 1769, ko Mt Edgecumbe. Ko tōna ingoa ake ko Pūtauaki. Ko tā tēnei mahi a te Pākehā o mua (mehemea rā kua mutu tēnei āhua ōna) he whai kia tau te noho a te iwi Pākehā. E kore rawa tēnei tūāhua e kitea i ēnei rā. Waihoki, e whakahokia ana ngā ingoa Māori tūturu o ngā takotoranga whenua rongonui, he mahi e kore e oti i te rangi kotahi.

Kāore te taha tōrangapū o te whiu pātai e whāiti mai ki te iwi kotahi. Heoi, he māmā ake te pare i te pātai ki rahaki i te kore e marama ki te pātai, tēnā i te kimi maramatanga ki te pātai. He mahi nui te kimi maramatanga mō ngā take e pā ana ki te iwitanga me te whakatau ko tēhea te iwi o te tangata, tae atu ki ngā kōrero heke iho mō ngā āhuatanga i pā, mai i te taenga mai o te Pākehā. Ki te whakaarohia te warea o te ao tōrangapū ki tēnei mea te iwitanga, ko tā *Moenga Roa* he whakaoho wairua, he whakarite pūtahitanga. Waihoki, he whakaara pātai anō tana mahi: ka pēhea ngā whakatipuranga o Aotearoa e whakaaro ana kua takahi whakamua kē rātou i roto i ngā āhuatanga e pā ana ki te iwitanga me te whakatau he Pākehā, he Māori rānei rātou. Ko wai rānei kei te whakatakoto whakaaro mō tēnei take; ko te ao tōrangapū, ko te ringa toi rānei? Oho mai i tō moenga roa.

1 Ranginui Walker in *Metro*, February 2001 in the essay ‘Hostages of history’

2 Book 1, *Ngā To Hoa Aroha*, published by University of Auckland 1983, p17 of the introduction written by Keith Sorrenson

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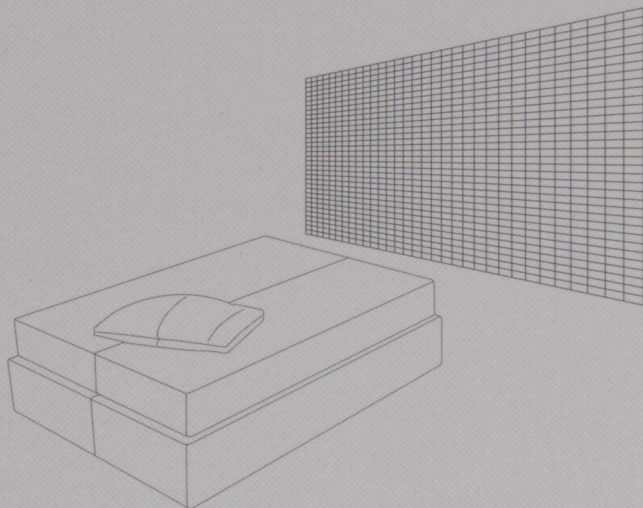
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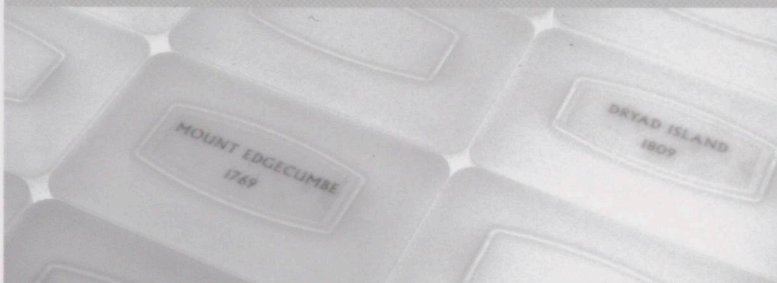


BATHROOM AND BEDROOM POLITICS: THE BLACK AND WHITE OF IT

Jonathan Mane-Wheoki
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nationalism. Less encouragingly, the title has uncertainty to it, for to speak of *Moenga Roa* is to stand before a tūpāpaku (deceased person) and pay tribute to and recount the life of the loved-one, farewelling them onto the next world.

While the politics of questioning is not exclusive 'questioning' is more easily rejected and misunderstood, rather than comprehended. Making meaning of race, identity politics and Colonial history is daunting. For all New Zealand's social, cultural and political stumbling, *Moenga Roa* provides a meeting point that is challenging, exposing and directional. Which can lead to a place that considers the future in-depth and opens up thinking. As you make your bed, so you must lie on it— everyone must bear the consequences of his own acts.



IN 2001 Brett Graham spent six months as artist-in-residence in Scuol, the Swiss alpine town that lies on the Lower Engiadina, close to the Italian Border. From Scuol he attended the opening, in June, of *Bi-polar*, the exhibition marking New Zealand's first official presence at the Venice Biennale. The artists represented, Jacqueline Fraser and Peter Robinson, are, like Graham, high-profile contemporary Māori artists who have profited both from the international exposure of their work and their exposure, in turn, to a global frame of reference.

For the artist-in-residence, the first task was to take stock of the immediate environment and try to make sense of the place. What was the relevance of Switzerland — the Southern Alps' near-antipodes, in fact — for a politically focussed young Māori artist so far from home? Graham's information-gathering uncovered some promising material about formative influences on European attitudes to race which to this day cast dark-skinned people into the role of 'other'. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the moralist whose concept of the uncomplicated 'noble savage' living in harmony with Nature gained wide currency in later eighteenth century Europe, was Swiss in origin, as was Johan Lavater, the proponent of the long since discredited, racist pseudoscience of physiognomy, in which character was judged from facial features. John Webber, the official artist on James Cook's third (and fatal) voyage to the Pacific, was also of Swiss parentage.

Scool had been, in the nineteenth century, a fashionable health spa to which Europeans flocked to 'take the waters'. In the grounds of the large hotel built in the 1860s (parallel to the Waikato land confiscations, the artist notes), stands a palatial residence built in anticipation of a visit from Queen Victoria (in whose name the Treaty of Waitangi, the 'marriage' between Māori and the Crown, was, in 1840, solemnised). Graham found his living quarters in the bathhouse 'sterile and white, almost asylum like'. His response to these clinical surroundings was to create from coal an overscaled bath. 'Coal,' he explained, 'is dirty and blackens everything it touches, it references racial slurs, yet is of the earth.' Ironically, it is from coal that black coal-tar soap, a legacy of Victorian science and industry, is manufactured. The product was originally marketed with humorous 'coon' and 'nigger' images.

Back home in Auckland, Brett Graham has moved, metaphorically, from the bathroom to the bedroom. These are the most private and intimate enclosed living spaces in our domestic environment. When we submit our bodies to cleansing routines, when our consciousness is almost suspended in sleep, we are at our most vulnerable. The bed, in addition to its primary function as a place of rest, is associated with nuptial consummation, conception, birth, convalescence and death. It can also be a place of domestic violence and sexual violation. The marriage bed in Shakespeare's *Othello* is a site of miscegenation and murder. Bending over his sleeping wife, the 'Moor of Venice' momentarily hesitates to 'scar that whiter skin of hers than snow and smooth as monumental alabaster' before smothering the blameless Desdemona with a pillow. Sin is black; moral (and, by implication, racial) purity is white.¹

Stark, shocking and apparently irreconcilable differences between blackness and whiteness delineate the racial and moral divide that Brett Graham critiques. In the permanently colonised condition of Māori, 'creature comforts' of 'civilisation' such as the pillow, the bed and the white sheet loom as emblems of cultural genocide. Anticipating the rapid



demise of Māori towards the end of the nineteenth century, Sir Walter Buller supposed that the colonists' role was 'to smooth the pillow of a dying race....' In such a scenario the bed becomes a bier, the sheet, a shroud.

Tension between the descendents of the colonisers and the colonised persists to this day. But, as Ranginui Walker observes, 'the differences from our Colonial past are being settled in the bedrooms of the nation'.² Just as the bedroom operates as a zone of assimilation in an ideologically bicultural nation, so the bathhouse might signify 'ethnic cleansing'. In 1899 an advertisement in *McClure's Magazine* depicted a naval admiral in the act of washing his hands. 'The first step towards lightening The White Man's Burden,'³ the advertising copy reads, 'is through teaching the virtues of cleanliness. Pear's soap is a potent factor in brightening the dark corners of the earth as civilization advances....' In the eighteenth century John Wesley preached that 'Cleanliness is, indeed, next to Godliness'.⁴ Cultural whitewash could be said to be one of the tragic consequences of European Colonialism and Christian imperialism on the colonised indigenous 'other'.

1 But see: "I am black but O! my soul is white" (William Blake, 'The Little Black Boy')

2 Ranginui Walker in *Metro*, February 2001 in the essay 'Hostages of history'

3 The title of an excruciatingly jingoistic and racist poem by the most imperialist of all Victorian poets: Rudyard Kipling.

4 Evangelical posters in the 1950s, in a parody of washing powder advertising hype, proclaimed, 'Jesus washes whitest of all.'

(left) Brett Graham *Bad Haus Scool* (detail) 2002 coal brick, collection of the artist.



MOENGA ROA

PUBLISHED ON THE OCCASION OF THE EXHIBITION
MOENGA ROA AT THE NEW GALLERY

Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
7 September - 10 November 2002
Exhibition Curator: Ngahiraka Mason
Exhibition Intern: Jessie Rawiri
Māori Language Translation: Huatau Māori Language
Consultants
Photography: Jennifer French
Publication Design: www.inhouse4.com
ISBN 0-86463-248-7



Brett Graham (Ngāti Koroki Kahukura) was born in 1967 in Auckland. A leading contemporary sculptor he has been included in major exhibitions such as *Pūrangiaho Seeing Clearly*, *Parihaka: The Art of Passive Resistance*, *Prospect 2001* and *Asia Pacific Triennial*. His work is collected by major institutions. Brett gained his BFA from University of Auckland in 1988 and was awarded an MFA from University of Hawaii in 1991. Some of his major commissions include sculptures for Victoria University Wellington, University of Auckland, Waikato University, Auckland University of Technology, Te Papa Tongarewa Museum Of New Zealand, Tjibaou Cultural Centre, Noumea, New Caledonia and the Wellington Sculpture Trust. Graham is a lecturer in contemporary Māori art at Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland.

Catalogue images: *Moenga Roa* (details) 2002, plastic, fluorescent tube, collection of the artist.

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