

## Asher Newbery – Artist’s Talk at The Central Art Gallery – Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> August 2021

Asher Newbery: We will talk a little bit today about some of the processes, some context, maybe about some of the individual works... I paint to express things that I can't articulate properly, and so I get lost easily when I am trying to explain my work. I'm so thankful to see so many people I know, allow me to introduce myself more formally.

*Ko Hiwi o te Wera me Kiha nā pae mauna  
Ko Wairewa me Haurepo nā kōawa  
Ko Nāti Manunui te hapu  
Ko Te Umuroa te marae  
Ko Tūhoe te iwi  
Ko Asher Raawiri Newbery te rinatoi.*

AN: My connection with Tuhoe has strengthened over the years; it was always my dream to head home and work with my iwi. A couple of years ago I was working in the tribal office. I managed a small team which looked after the artifacts and the artworks of the iwi. I was there for a couple of years, but when my father passed away I came home. I consider my marae in Ruatahuna, Te Umuroa my turangawaewae but my home in Lyttelton to be my Ahika. My pakeha family has been in Lyttelton for like, 150 years or something. For me there is no conflict in that, you can have both, 100%.

I thought I'd start explaining just a little bit about what Māori Art is. Over the last couple of days questions have come in about 'Why I might consider myself as a Māori artist, or this as Māori art'. There is no clear answer, it's an ongoing conversation and when I was in art school – maybe I should start there! I went to art school in Palmerston North, to a school called Toioho ki Apiti. What makes it unique is that it is an arts school based in Māori studies. At the time, it was the only one, now I think there are three or four. We would have this conversation every year, about what Māori art is. Whether pakeha people can create Māori art, or that all art Māori people make is Māori art.

Hirini Moko Mead said there are three things that make Māori art. Firstly, it is art that is done by a person who is Māori. That's not subjective, it's absolute. The second part is that it's accepted as Māori art by Māori community. The third is a little bit more problematic. He was talking about how Māori art must adhere to a Māori cannon of taste. For a lot of us, if the person is Māori and making art, it is Māori art.

Maybe if I talked a little bit about process. I work on the floor and every part of how I make these works is tied to concepts of Te Ao Māori. The creation of humans starts on the ground. In some stories it was Tane Mahuta who formed the first human a woman, Hinetitama, from the clay. Many parts of my process reflect the cosmological narratives of our Iwi Māori. I've been working on MDF for a while. All of this is saved from the skip at Christchurch Art Gallery, these are literally the gallery walls. So yeah, I paint on the ground using a big brush. These are the brush marks you can see on top, they go all the way back, that's what creates the texture. It's a whakapapa process, trying to build up enough paint, enough movement and texture to warm up the surface. MDF as a surface can very cold because it is so flat and smooth. Consider canvas as the opposite. Its natural surface is warmer to the eye.

Jonathan Smart: It's interesting isn't it, for me Asher, looking at these in the sort of natural side light you can actually see those layers of swirled applied paint underneath.

AN: Seeing them change throughout the day, and this is something I've been doing in my painting for a long time – observing the effect that light has on the work – and trying to control that. I work in an underground bunker, underneath Super Restaurant in Lyttelton it is lit by fluorescent bulbs that emit a cold light, they make colour appear cold, but they are consistent. So, I feel like I have better control of what the finished painting might look like. I've been doing this, this type of technique, for a long time. I don't need time to draw inspiration or anything like that, I just start.

This show is named Ruruhira, after my daughter. My family are here with me today (points to them sitting in the audience). Every Sunday, I am down in the studio by myself, every week, as that's my art time. There were times in my life when I spent a lot more time in the studio, but I feel that by regulating my time painting, for one reason or another, has produced better results.

JS: I think there's an aspect of the way you use white underneath that is interesting.

AN: Yeah, I mean, mostly I use lots of white because it's the cheapest paint!

Audience question: Do you get that from the skip as well?

AN: Nah you don't get free white paint! Basically, the shapes and the movement, they are all done with white and then the colour comes afterwards. There're parts of my process I don't feel entirely comfortable with talking about, because it's kind of personal. Some secrets I want to keep to myself especially around colour. But also, using black, so I build up the other layers and then it all gets blacked out. The shapes are painted in backwards and the process is repeated basically until I am happy with it. It can be hard to decide when the work is finished and sometimes it is not. The work generally knows when it is done.

Audience question: This is still on the floor?

AN: Yes, all on the floor.

AN: I keep some finished work up on my walls to reference and keep on teaching me on what I have done. Maybe I over-cook something, and so I will keep it there, so I don't overdo it again. But certainly, with painting on the floor, it's just physics as well. If I painted this on an easel the paint would all fall off. In terms of tools, I use a roller handle, cut the roller off and use a brush which screws into the handle. I have a white brush in the white water and a black brush in the black water, and these get cleaned a couple of times a year. It is different, there's parts of this process where I must wear knee pads and wrist wraps just to hold my body together. Jono called me a young artist the other day, I don't feel like that much anymore after working on this, on the floor!

Recently when people have asked me about why I am using these colours, I don't really have a solid answer. My first solo show at CoCA all the works were blue. My Grandma came to the exhibition and said, "I love the colour" and that was all I really needed. Back then I really could only afford one colour at a time. Although these works look purple/pink this effect is made using maybe dozens of similar colours.

Māori colour theory or understanding of colour is very different from what we have inherited from the West. For example, black might mean potential, rather than The Void, and red might be a chiefly colour rather than an angry one. Green is the colour we associate with mourning because we wear the green leaves of the Kawakawa throughout the tangihanga process.

We've made a real effort to not use gendered colours with our daughter, and then I've gone and made a how show named after her in pink and purple. "Ruruhira, what's your favourite colour?" Usually its kakariki, so the next show might be green!

Maybe now we can talk about some of the context. I named this after Ruruhira, and on the face of it these images are like a learning aid for my daughter. I can ask her "what's this?" "It's a Manawa, a Heart. And this is a Tapawhā Rite, a Square". And a lot of it comes from playing with a toy, where you put the shape into the right hole. There's a semi-circle down here which I call 'Pizza Oven'. My brother built a pizza oven and wow, Ruruhira couldn't believe it, that we were building this hole, putting fire in there and cooking food with it! And that's the shape of it. On the front there's just a simple story of me and my daughter learning together. There are many other layers and stories in works like these but sometimes what you see at the front of the image is enough.

In my work overall, I paint a lot about Māori cosmological narratives, beginning of the universe kind of stuff. Specifically, in these works, when the universe is in the state of Te Po, a time after Te Kore, the void. Many of us will have heard the stories about Papatuanuku and Ranginui in the embrace, and all their children lived with no space around them, it was very tight. Onepoto escaped into space and returned but no one could understand what space was because they had never experienced it. The thing about Te Po it was a warm space, it wasn't cold, and it also wasn't completely dark. Hinātore existed in this space. Hinātore is the light in the moon, the stars, and in phosphorescence. I'm painting in the part when things first start to separate. They embraced, there was darkness, then they separated and there was light. That moment of separation isn't really described and so I try and think about it with paint.

JS: That for me Asher is very effective. There's a density in these isn't there, particularly in this lovely natural side light you can sense that phosphorescence in the magentas as light is coming in. I think that's a lovely thing. When we were hanging them, Tipene (Asher's brother) said "My god!"

AN: Yeah, because he had only seen them in the dark. The sun came through and then wow! It's like seeing them for the first time.

During my masters I wrote my thesis on time and space, and I asked heaps of questions to experts on this type of thing, when Rangi and Papa got separated, did the light flood in, or was light created in that moment? I use paint to investigate these types of understandings.

Audience member: What is the significance of the shapes?

AN: There's a certain point where it's just a cool shape, sometimes. There was a whole set of six that Jono kicked out of the show and in that there was a Mere, a Kotiate and a Wahaika (all names of Māori weapons). Some of the reason why they are interesting shapes is because they can all be made from the same whale jawbone. It's a cool story, something I will share with my daughter when she can understand.

The kape is a shape that I have used for quite a long time. It's an ancient image, no one really knows where it came from. A number of art historians identified it as a kape or kaperua after seeing it in whareniui. It is also at the centre of the Tūhoe flag. Kape is an old word for eyebrow, and so that's why they thought it was called kape because of the eyebrow shape. But it's more likely that it ties to an earlier meaning which is has something about parts missing. And about Koru. That's kind of it, it's like I say, I've just been learning by drawing, it's kind of fun. It's a circle with four circles cut out of it. This is highly stylised, usually it looks a little bit more like the one over there on that wall (points to other painting), sort of flatter. And it's used in kowhaiwhai pattern.

The one kind of 'odd-ball' is this one here (points to *Imurangi & Tuhirangi*). The big, long work, it has two Kape shapes and the blackness of it. I started making that when I was trying to work out what a dogstar was. A dogstar or perihelion is a phenomenon where it appears there are three suns on the horizon. During my reading I found the Māori atua for that phenomenon, which is Imurangi and Tuhirangi. They were responsible for this particular phenomenon, described as fractal rainbows. I've never seen it but my tipuna did. And they attributed atua to it.

When I did my thesis on Wā – Wā is the Māori, or Va is Polynesian – word for both time and space. It's a constant in my work, but a Māori understanding of time is very different. A famous example is the phrase 'Ngā wā i mua'. It literally means the time (and space) in front of us, but this phrase is used to mean the past. Rather than time being linear, from the beginning to the end, time comes in and out. So, when I am reading these cosmological narratives, I try to understand them away from the Eurocentric paradigm we were born into. For example, the war of the atua is presented to us as happening at the beginning of time, but I'm not thinking about it being a beginning, but as still happening. Tāwhiri atua of the winds still rages against his brothers. The unborn atua Ruamoko still kicks in his mother's womb causing our earth to shake.

Lastly, whakapapa is a real constant in my practice. Whakapapa is the word we use to mean genealogy. Whakapapa literally means to lay flat, or the base of something. Or perhaps to layer. And so, painting for me is a physical expression of whakapapa, the rich layering. In the same way that what my grandparents did affected my parents, affects me. The very first layers of these paintings affect the front. These paintings help me to understand concepts like this, I get all lost in it!

Audience question: Did you start this during lockdown?

AN: Just after. I did do a lot of painting then, but it was quite chaotic. There's probably 30 layers on these ones, maybe, during lockdown there were hundreds.

Audience question: What is 'Kiritai'?

AN: Kiritai, it's a word that means the topcoat, the membrane of a cell and it's the space directly outside the pā (fortified village). I'm learning about the Māori language through my painting.

JS: Many thanks for coming everyone and thank-you Asher for giving up some of your studio day.