

Art in Oceania: A new history

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Deidre Brown

School of Architecture and Planning
University of Auckland

According to my mother one of my first words was 'house'. Although I'm not entirely sure of the truth of this statement, I've certainly been interested in the design of buildings and their social significance since I was a child, and this led me to study architecture at the University of Auckland.

With the encouragement of some of the staff, I decided to embark on an academic, rather than a practice-based career. This required the completion of Masters and PhD theses in Maori architecture, specifically the religious-political architecture of Maori pan-tribal movements from the beginning of the Kingitanga, in the mid nineteenth century, to the founding of the Ratana Church, one hundred years latter. The postgraduate degrees, added to the five year undergraduate degree, kept me in full-time study for the best part of a decade. If the plan when I entered University was to get a professional degree which would lead to an established career path, albeit in a non-traditional area for a woman (and a Maori!), this had been completely turned on its head by the time I had finished.

There aren't many academic jobs for people with my area of speciality, so in 1998, after my PhD was completed, I grasped the opportunity to be a lecturer in Maori art history at the University of Canterbury. The new role necessitated a role change from architectural historian to art historian and, even more of a challenge, embarking on what was to become a six year commuter relationship with my long-term partner based in Auckland. Professionally, the Canterbury environment allowed me to grow as a teacher, curator, researcher and administrator. The first of four books that I have written on Maori art, *Tai Tokerau Whakairo Rakau: Northland Maori Wood Carving* (2003) was written here and won a Montana Book Award. It was also at Canterbury that I first met Drs Annie Potts and Philip Armstrong, and together we were awarded a Marsden Grant in 2004 for the project 'Kararehe: The Animal in New Zealand Society'. So much of New Zealand identity rests on our relationship to animals as food, economic resources, popular culture and high culture icons and as companions. My part of the project deals with the animal in art and in particular the role of animals as signifiers of identity, human psychology, spirituality, wealth, settlement and cultural change in work by Maori and Pakeha artists. I am also examining depictions of human-animal hybrids as these occur in Māori and in contemporary Pākehā art.



Deidre with her son Max

In late 2003, I finally returned to Auckland, my partner (who I married that November), and my alma mater, to teach at the Architecture School at the University of Auckland. Maori art and architecture remain my passion and vocation, and this year I received another Marsden Grant to write a new history of Oceanic art under the leadership of Dr Peter Brunt (Victoria University of Wellington) and in association with Sean Mallon (Te Papa), Prof. Nicholas Thomas (Cambridge University), Dr Lissant Bolton (British Museum) and Suzanne Kuechler (University College, London). The project, which will be realised as a book, attempts to set Pacific art in an international and academic context whilst maintaining a Pacific-centred, rather than an ethnographic, approach to the material. Customary art will be an important element, and previously marginalised areas -- such as women's art, art influenced by colonial contact, and contemporary art -- will receive equal treatment.

The translation of research into teaching is an important aspect of academia. My research work has focussed on understanding indigenous culture. Together with my colleagues, Drs Diane Brand and Rosangela Tenorio, we have developed an interdisciplinary design teaching model that uses the cultural diversity of the class as a resource (rather than an 'issue' or 'problem') and a design generator. Around half of the students at the School of Architecture are of Asian origin or descent, and two-thirds of the student body were not born in New Zealand. Our efforts have been recognised this year with a University of Auckland Teaching Excellence Award for Collaboration in Teaching. Together with other colleagues from the Faculties of Medical and Health Sciences and Education, as well as the Careers Centre and Centre for Academic Development, Dr Te Oti Rakena (Music) and I have recently received a Teaching Research and Learning Initiative Fund Grant to investigate the drivers for Maori and Pacific student success in non-lecture based learning situations.

Despite my concerns when I finished my PhD almost ten years ago, the last decade has been a bit of a dream run in terms of my career. Admittedly I have had to work hard and, with some retrospective regret, sacrifice parts of my personal life. But I have also worked with and taught some amazing people, been given the opportunity to think freely and to develop new ideas, as well as travel all around the world. I could not have achieved any of this without the understanding of my husband, and in the last six months our lives have been transformed -- like some kind of reward for hanging in there --with the arrival of our beautiful son, Maximilian. Recently I returned to work part-time, in anticipation of a full time return in August. As a breastfeeding mum I am my son's primary caregiver and so do much of my work at home. He receives my full attention for the hours that he is 'up', and after this I work for three hours before I go to bed, which most often means turning in around 2 am. It is sometimes frustrating that work I could have once done in a day now takes up to a week to complete as I fit it around care-giving. But the reward is being a parent to a lovely child, and I can only but wait to hear what his first words will be!