

SHANE COTTON

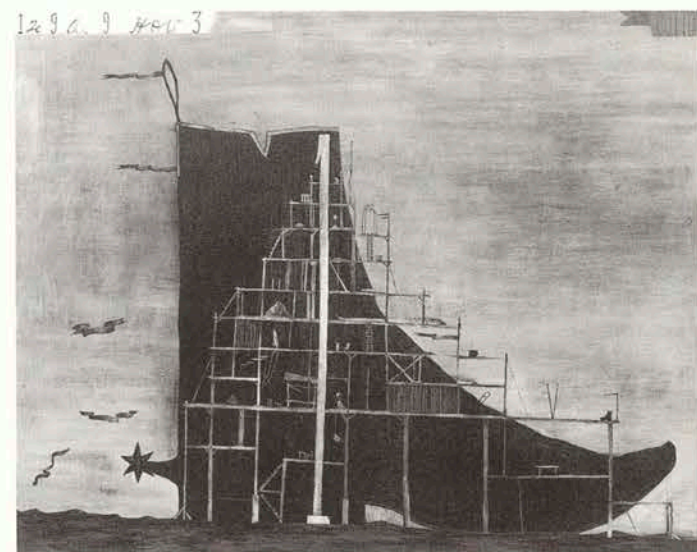
RECENT PAINTINGS

GOVETT-BREWSTER ART GALLERY NEW PLYMOUTH
23 APRIL - 28 MAY 1995

SHANE COTTON: RECENT PAINTINGS brings together eleven works from 1993-1994. Together, they draw on Cotton's discovery and exploration of aspects of nineteenth century Maori figurative painting while addressing the cross-fertilisation of ideas and images between Maori and Pakeha cultures.

Maori figurative painting and Maori folk art developed during the European settlement of Aotearoa/New Zealand from such visual influences as illustrated mission literature, needlework patterns, scrimshaw from whaling and trading vessels, artist's impressions and, later, photographs. Images such as trees, grapevines, flowering shrubs in Victorian vases, naturalistic studies of birds and portraiture were borrowed, adapted and often incorporated into the existing style of traditional Maori art.

For the most part these images were translated to the context of the whare tipuna (ancestral house) and integrated with the architecture, predominantly in the form of heke (rafters), poupou (posts) and kaho paetara (wall panels). Cotton re-translates the visual language of this art by introducing it into the public arena of the art gallery. The mobility of these images is something he is very aware of and actively participates in. Aesthetically and thematically this mobility is heightened by the incorporation and juxtaposition of pop imagery and European art forms.



Te ao hou 1993

Cotton is selective about the images he addresses from early figurative Maori painting. He is interested, not just in their "naive" aesthetic, but also in their validity and relevance to the social and political structures that existed at the time they were made. In Cotton's paintings the chair, star, mountain, spurred boot, flag, potted plant, medallion and striped pot are consistently reworked and re-presented to form a multitude of hybrid images and complex and shifting meanings.

For example, the star which occurs in several paintings is orchestrated in different arrangements and for different purposes. Historically, stars found in the Rongopai meeting house on the East Coast - one of Cotton's sources - represent the stars that guided the ancestral canoes to Aotearoa. Cotton adapts this symbol of the discovery of a new land to speak of European colonisation. In *Compressed view* a lone star, like a sheriff's badge, sits on the chair; in this work and in *Te ao hou* the star also forms the spur on a riding boot. *Te ao hou*, translated as "the new world" refers to the dawning of a new age for both Maori and Pakeha during colonisation. The spurred boot and sheriff's badge recall the American cowboy of the Wild West which in

turn suggests European exploration of the Pacific territories as the braving of a "new frontier".

In *Untitled* a halo of stars encircles the mountain peak. The image mimics the Paramount Film Studio motif, a play perhaps on the idea that land is "paramount" for the Maori. The halo may also draw attention to the sacred nature of the mountain and its inherent connection to the stars in forming readable weather and seafood gathering patterns.

The double view is further implied in the way the mountain is being both contained and numerically "fractured". The numbers dotted about the landscape on flimsy structures are symbolic of European domestication of the land, European mapping systems and the numbering of land claim blocks. The word (SLICE) across the top of the painting and the rough, brown, pitted background suggest the ploughing of earth, an act of protest by the people of Parihaka who ploughed their own lands in resistance to European claim and confiscation.

This incompatibility of European and Maori attitudes to the land is still very apparent in today's "fiscal envelope" debate, where quantifying in monetary terms to settle land grievances (Pakeha) is problematic in relation to concerns of guardianship, authority and well being for future generations (Maori and Pakeha).

One motif that appears in *Whakapiri atu te whenua*, *You say A,B,C...*, *Picture painting* and *Te kau ma ono* is the potted plant. Both historically and for Cotton this image has "associations of land containment, nurture and ownership".¹ Here, it is also a clear reference to European colonisation of Aotearoa/New Zealand. In *Whakapiri atu te whenua*, for instance, the connotations of land containment and nurture are complicated by the dying plants around the base of the healthy flowering shrub; these suggest the negative effects on both nature and culture of enclosure and containment by an opposing force. In this and other works, the pot also appears empty or with different contents; according to its context and form it suggests a cooking pot (again, a reminder of European settlement), a trophy (a European symbol of victory) or, in *Untitled*, a serving dish.

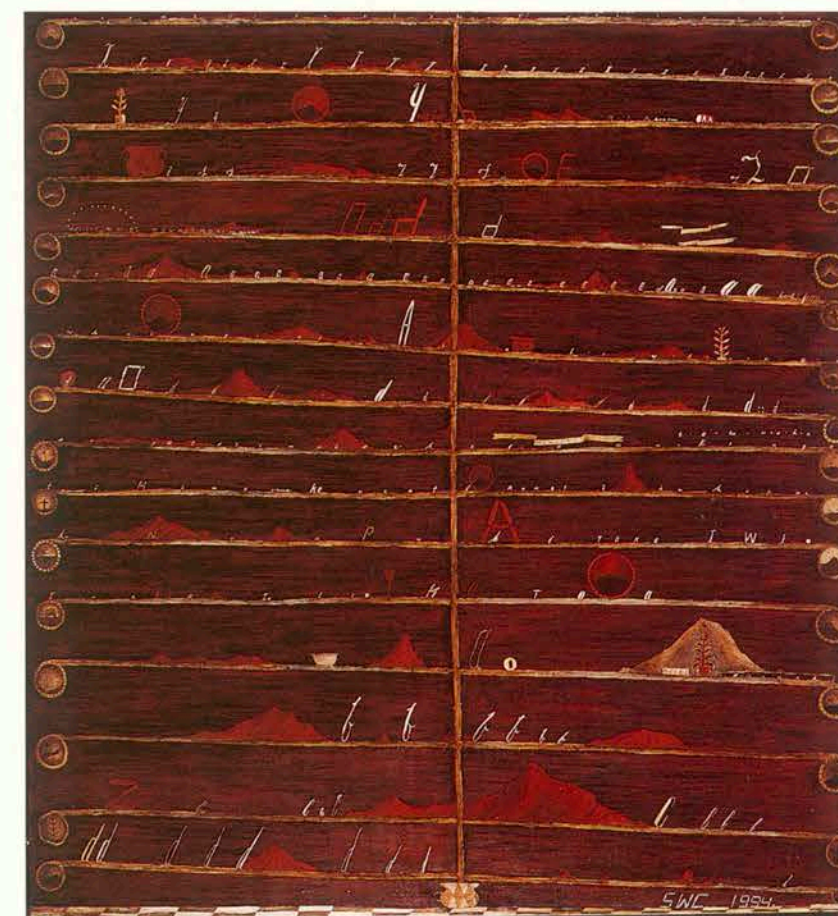
In *You say A,B,C...* and *Te kau ma ono* the branches of the plant act literally as supports for a variety of objects, such as mountains and small pots, and for written language. The subject of *You say A,B,C...* is the difference between cultures. Its title recalls the popular song "You say tomato, I say tomatto...let's call the whole thing off". In the song, there is a tongue-in-cheek suggestion that the relationship between the two parties be cancelled on the grounds of very superficial differences. The differences Cotton speaks of are more profound and complicated and the relationship between Maori and Pakeha is here to stay. This painting signals a juxtaposition of two very different systems of language, meaning and belief, including oral versus written language; and the relationship to land through oral whakapapa (genealogy) versus written title to land.

The connection between land and language is further developed in *x-d*. Here the letters are repeated over and over, written on a scaffolding that also supports a number of small mountain forms. The work recalls attempts by the English missionary, Thomas Kendall, to write down the Maori language with the assistance of Hongi Hika as they travelled together to England in 1814. Kendall had, as he recognised, absolutely no knowledge of how to begin to organise spoken Maori as a written language. "As he laboured to compile ... lists and to note 'parts of speech', Hongi Hika copied out the letters of the alphabet with great concentration."²



Whakapiri atu te whenua 1993
oil on canvas
1775mm x 1605mm

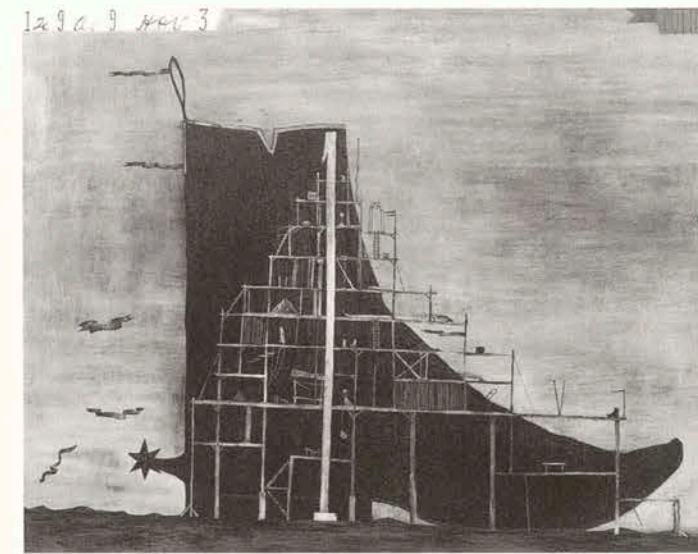
Te kau ma ono 1994
oil on canvas
1830mm x 1675mm



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Sold 1994

The scaffolding that forms the lines for the letters to lodge upon suggests language as a construction, the building up of a coherent structure which creates meaning. The rows of repeated letters are derived from old-fashioned copybooks, which children used when learning to write. The copybook image suggests rote learning and imitation without necessarily understanding the significance of the words or actions. This could refer equally to Kendall's superficial grasp of the concepts of Maori language; to Hongi Hika's struggles with the European alphabet; and to misunderstandings arising from differences between the Pakeha and Maori versions of the Treaty of Waitangi.

The letters "a" and "o" written repeatedly in *Te kau ma ono* and in *You say A,B,C...* reference possession or belonging as signified in Maori language. It's significant that in a number of the works the "o" becomes a kind of medallion, enclosing images of land; framing the issue of ownership, whether of language or land, culture or image.

In several of these works Cotton references work by Pakeha artists. For instance, the mountain in *Untitled* is drawn from Ronnie van Hout's photograph for the cover of *Midwest 1*. Van Hout's image is, in turn, a direct quotation of nineteenth century topographer Charles Heaphy's watercolour painting of *Mt Egmont from the Southward* (1840).

Sold refers directly to Dick Frizzell's *Grocer with moko* (1992), one of his controversial *Tiki* series in which he reworked the Maori hei tiki form in a range of modern painting styles. In *Grocer with moko*, Frizzell invested the advertising image of the Four Square grocer with a traditional Maori moko or facial tattoo. This conflation of a commercial image with a design signalling high status in Maori culture was considered offensive by many, both Maori and Pakeha.

Cotton's punning title alludes to the European acquisition of Maori land. (Interestingly, tattoo designs were sometimes used as signatures on land deeds.) Cotton has removed the moko, so that the image reverts back to the original Four Square man motif. In so doing Cotton

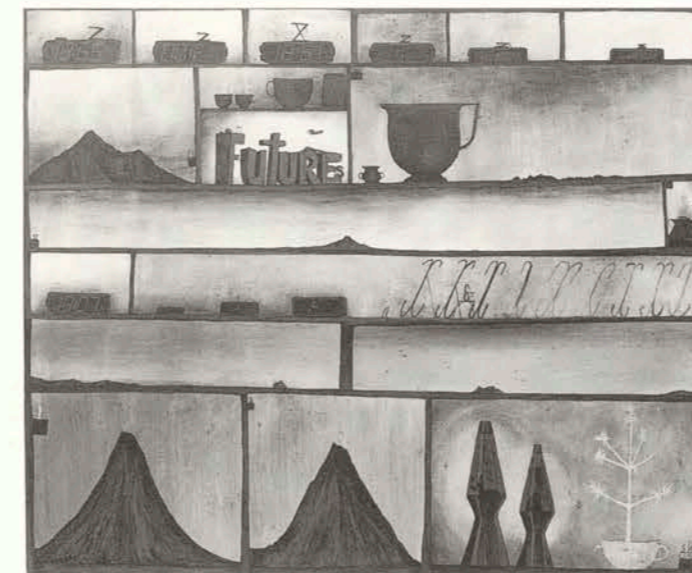
unearths another story, one where *Grocer with moko* is perhaps "Grosser" without. The mountains, pots and scrolls gravitate around the face as if held in check; they refer to the colonisers' purchases, products and power.

Picture painting also references a work by another artist. The image of the flower at the top of the painting is taken from an early Gordon Walters' painting, *Chrysanthemum* (1944). Walters has been both hotly criticised and enthusiastically defended in recent years for his appropriation and manipulation of the Maori koru form in many of his best known works. Here Cotton borrows a quite different Walters' motif. Walters' chrysanthemum is planted in a striped pot, very like the jug image from the Rongopai marae, suggesting a complex interweaving of histories, past and present, Maori and Pakeha. The copyright symbol beside the artist's signature highlights the complexities of the appropriation debate. Who owns images? What rights should there or can there be over cultural property? Cotton suggests the issue of appropriation is not as black and white as it's been painted.

The formal qualities of these works contribute significantly to their meanings. The colours Cotton uses are predominantly white, red and brown. This restricted palette evokes a sense of history, of paintings faded over time. However, the early Maori "folk" artists used commercial paints, introduced by the Europeans. Their bright reds, blues and greens would not have faded into these muted colours. Instead Cotton's paintings seem to draw on the traditional colours of Maori visual culture; and there is a prevailing use of the "Maori red" colour which well-meaning Pakeha anthropologists working in museums used to overpaint many traditional carvings, in a mistaken attempt to retrieve their "authenticity".

Another striking feature is the flatness of the images. Objects, and scenes are depicted as if on the same plane. Within this equality, Cotton plays deliberately and effectively with scale. A mountain is smaller than a boot; an urn towers over the dead tree alongside it, and a tiny Parliamentary chair perches on its rim.³ This device reflects the distortions of scale common in folk art, in which important things are frequently made larger than life.

It also allows Cotton to create some particularly telling images. In *Needlework*, the land is depicted as a pincushion, pierced with long thin "pins". European and Maori flags, Maori palisade fences and a European



Daze 1994

table (suggestive of the Treaty of Waitangi signing table) all share space on the land, in an acknowledgement of the co-existence, however uneasy, of both Maori and Pakeha cultures.⁵ This image, with its flagstaves stabbing the land, refers to the European practice of securing land ownership by literally staking a claim. The lines drawn between the fences allude to lines of negotiation between the two parties; or perhaps they are uncrossable boundaries.

The objects juxtaposed in *Daze* are more compartmentalised, though the manipulation of scale is equally important. Cotton has said of *Daze* that "a number of disparate references that span different times are brought together on a single plane. Images of the future, dulled by past dates, are commodified and shelved. I'm suggesting different experiences of time, not necessarily the distinction between past, present and future."⁶

The work combines Haim Steinbach's lava lamps, digital alarm clocks, childishly written Xs, and the now familiar pots and mountains. Culture and nature, past and present histories are "shelved and commodified" alongside one another. As well as this generalising co-existence, Cotton includes in *Daze* some very specific and telling juxtapositions. For example, the figures 1907 appear on one of the digital clocks. The Tohunga Suppression Act was made law in 1907 and under it Maori were forbidden to predict their own future. At the same time, Pakeha were predicting that the Maori were rapidly advancing towards extinction. This suppression of Maori leadership contributed to the erosion of communal life. This law was not repealed until as recently as 1962, a fact underlined by Cotton's use of the very contemporary clock.

As a lecturer in Maori Visual Arts Cotton is immersed in an active Maori-based learning environment. These paintings are in many ways a product of that environment. Together, they encompass his personal history, New Zealand "art history", and the history of Aotearoa. Rearticulated from a contemporary Maori perspective, his borrowed images read as codes of resistance to European settlement, arranged to reveal our past histories while commenting on and challenging our present position.

Penny Swann, exhibition curator

- "Something in the pot: Luke Strongman talks to Shane Cotton" *Midwest 5* 1994, pp 19-21 [19].
- Judith Binney *The legacy of guilt: the life of Thomas Kendall* Oxford University Press, 1968, p.24.
- Roger Neich *Painted histories* Early Maori Figurative Painting, Auckland University Press 1993, p.162.
- This stylised chair which features strongly in *Compressed view* is sourced from an image of a Parliamentary chair in a whare puni (sleeping house) at Waioeka Pa, Bay of Plenty. Like the flags that occur in many of the works, it functions as a Maori appropriation of a European symbol of power.
- These include the Union Jack and various Maori "rebel" warrior flags bearing the insignia, such as the crescent, star, moon and cross, of Christian-influenced Maori religious groups such as that led by Te Kooti Arikirangi.
- "Something in the pot: Luke Strongman talks to Shane Cotton" *Midwest 5* 1994, pp 19-21 [20].

Photo *Whakapiri atu te whenua*: courtesy Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa Wellington.
All other photographs Bryan James.

This publication has been supported by the Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa.

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

- Whakapiri atu te whenua* 1993 oil on canvas 1775mm x 1605mm collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa
Untitled 1994 oil on canvas 1830mm x 1520mm collection of Govett-Brewster Art Gallery
Picture painting 1994 oil on canvas 1830mm x 1520mm collection of Auckland City Art Gallery
Sold 1994 oil on canvas 1830mm x 1520mm private collection
Compressed view 1993 oil on canvas 1605mm x 1780mm collection of Robert Jahnke
Te kau ma ono 1994 oil on canvas 1830 x 1675mm collection of Jane Vesty and Brian Sweeney
Daze 1994 oil on canvas 1520mm x 1830mm Godwit Collection
Needlework 1993 oil on canvas 2105 x 1525 collection of Catherine Bagnall and Julian Bishop
You say A,B,C... 1994 oil on canvas 1830mm x 1520mm collection of Gary Langsford
Te ao hou 1993 oil on canvas 1220mm x 1525mm collection of Jane Vesty and Brian Sweeney
x-d 1994 oil on canvas 1830mm x 1525mm collection of the Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North.

SHANE COTTON born Upper Hutt, 1964

Nga Pahi
 BFA, University of Canterbury, 1985-1988
 Diploma in Teaching, Christchurch College of Education, 1991

Exhibition history (*denotes solo exhibitions)

- 1990 *Nature Forms Myths* (with Peter Robinson) Last Decade Gallery, Wellington
*New works** Brooke Gifford Gallery, Christchurch
 1991 *Kahia ko taikaka anake*, National Art Gallery, Wellington
Recognitions Robert McDougall Art Annex, Christchurch
He toi tutanga na ngaa toa o te ware wananga o waitaha University of Canterbury, Christchurch
 1992 *Te Kupenga* CSA Gallery, Christchurch
New works (with Peter Robinson), Claybrook Gallery, Auckland
Canvassing south Gow Langsford Gallery, Wellington
Motifi/Motive CSA Gallery, Christchurch
Shadow of style Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth and Wellington City Art Gallery.
Prospect Canterbury '92 Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch
*Strata** Brooke Gifford Gallery, Christchurch
 1993 Opening exhibition, Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington
Te hau a tonga, Te Taumata Gallery, Auckland
Groundswell, Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North
*Collections** Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington
 1994 *5 New Zealand artists*, DKW Gallery, Melbourne
Te Puroa, Shed 1, Wellington
Parallel lines: Gordon Walters in context, Auckland City Art Gallery
*New works** Claybrook Gallery, Auckland
*New works** Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington

Bibliography

- B. French "A choreography of form: the paintings of Shane Cotton" *Art New Zealand 60*, pp63-65.
 William McAloon "Growing cultures" *Shadow of style* Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, and Wellington City Art Gallery, p.4.
 Penny Swann "Visual quotations" *Collections* Hamish McKay Gallery.
 Cover art *Midwest 5*
 Interview with Luke Strongman, *Midwest 5*, pp19-21.



Needlework 1993
oil on canvas
2105mm x 1525mm

Untitled 1994
oil on canvas
1830mm x 1520mm

(cover)
You say A,B,C... 1994
oil on canvas
1830mm x 1520mm