

# IN HER IMAGE

Retrospective in shape and content, IN HER IMAGE turns to women-centred art practices and realms of the sacred. From postmodern feminisms and voices of mana wāhine, to contemporary embodiments and medieval imaginings, IN HER IMAGE draws together a diversity of Aotearoa New Zealand herstory. The Dunedin Public Art Gallery provided the research base for this exhibition, with support from Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka o Hākena and the loan of a *hook but no fish* (2017; 2020) by Sriwhana Spong.

IN HER IMAGE presents both critical and celebratory enquiries into the sacred. A sentimental 'Madonna and Child' sits in contrast with active and politicised points of view. The body becomes a site of affirmation, agency or critique, dismantling an assumed dichotomy between the sacred and profane. Postmodern feminisms and contemporary historicisms critically revisit inherited European religious narratives and iconography. Exploratory and experiential knowledge systems are anchored to land and place. Each work tells its own herstory, through the artist's own image or the figure of another, speaking to aspects of approaching, revising or reclaiming realms of the sacred *in her image*.

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ARTS COUNCIL OF NEW ZEALAND TOI AOTEAROA

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## THE MADONNA: A FIGUREHEAD DE-CENTRED

The late Renaissance *Madonna and Child Enthroned* (c. post-1513) by Garofalo (1481-1559) is both a figurehead and critical reference point for the representation of women in Christian art history. In the context of this exhibition, the Madonna is a site of contrast with work by women who base spiritual sensibilities in lived experience or personal heritage. Conceptual and abstract allusions to the body, the interrogation of language, and earth-centred worldviews enter this exhibition from wider sources, de-centring Madonna's throne.

*Madonna and Child Enthroned* finds its origin in the practice and history of religion – namely an early 16th century Roman Catholic context of Ferrara, Italy. As a piece of material culture from this time, the work can tell us something about the practice of religion in that context. It also represents centuries of iconographical evolution, convention, and doctrinal tradition, exemplifying the regal type of the Virgin Mary. Cultural historian Marina Warner presents a concise overview of the layers of meaning in the Maria Regina:

first, the queenship of Mary expresses her signal triumph, through her virginity and her Assumption, over human weakness and evil; second, the modern theology of Maria Regina is grounded in her supremely efficient powers of intercession with Christ; furthermore, the association of Mary with the allegorical figure of the Church makes her regal authority an assertion of the Church's power.<sup>1</sup>

Encompassing these characteristics, *Madonna and Child Enthroned* was designed to inspire piety through a gentle sentimentality, and to sit as a figurehead for the ideal maternal woman. Somewhat removed from her original religious cultural setting in the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, what does she say to us today?

Warner sought to address this question in her study *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (1974). This book was a personal and critical study of Catholic material religious culture, written by Warner as a way to come to terms with the political ideology and theology of the Virgin Mary that impacted her life growing up in the Catholic Church. Warner wondered if Mary's tropes and codes were outdated. The Madonna: both carnal and heavenly, maternal and virginal, how are women to live up to her example? Can the Virgin Mary be re-written or re-envisioned within personal lived experience? Does this heritage also offer something we can acknowledge as formative and affirmative?

To critically reflect on the idea of religious devotion and art (or the devotion of art) Kushana Bush's *The Assembly* (2011) presents us with an almost satirical

depiction of the idea. Members of a diverse assembly sit or stand around a sculptural bust in various states of rapture. This work draws forth a religious sensibility of the kind that has encompassed centuries of devotion to depictions of religious figures. The representation of the bust in *The Assembly* resembles a woman – self-reflexively alluding to the concept of devotion, quietly de-centring it through an implicit absurdity.

Within the context of this exhibition, *Madonna and Child Enthroned* and *The Assembly*, present points of contrast between religious aesthetics and art history, or in this case, between art originally designed for religious purposes, and art that resists, critiques or populates an experimental space. This difference could be described as contrasting exterior or interior focuses: the external or didactic representation of a religious figure is juxtaposed with personal explorations or research enquiries in the artist's own image.

## OUR SPIRITUALITY OURSELVES: THE WOMEN'S ART MOVEMENT:

The exhibition *Mothers*, curated by the Women's Gallery and exhibited in Aotearoa and Sydney in the early 1980s, addressed some of the thinking around the place of the 'Madonna and Child' as the ideal woman and mother. All three catalogue essays that accompanied the *Mothers* exhibition refer to the 'Madonna and Child' as a maternal trope to revise – to shift registers from a passive or static image to more relatable and active process-orientated explorations based in the materiality of the body and the lived experience of motherhood.

This significance of lived experience emerges in the words of poet and activist Heather McPherson. In the early days of the women's art movement in Christchurch, McPherson experienced a shared appreciation for an alternative spiritual heritage outside of the Christian Church that she and others she knew had grown up in. McPherson writes of '[wanting] to try to bring together the connections of a women's heritage, of a spirituality, of women's relationships in this enormously long context...[or] herstory.'<sup>3</sup> A hunt for images of a feminine divine ensued – a reclamation of the Goddess through imagery, ritual and performance art as a strategy to step beyond the patriarchal hegemony of organised religion.

Feminist archaeology of the 1960s and 1970s made inroads in decentring androcentric interpretations of prehistory. These perspectives were then amalgamated with mythology in the modern Goddess movement.<sup>4</sup> International lines of connection between artists associated with the women's art movement emerged in an almost synchronous fashion as they picked

up on this mix of ancient herstory as an artistic and political strategy, and for some, the personal adoption of a new spiritual movement. McPherson's position encapsulates a shared sensibility and strategy: 'We were working on a supposition --- discovery, certainty --- that our spirituality was ourselves, that it was not outside ourselves, that its manifestation was political.'<sup>5</sup> Spirituality was acknowledged as intimately connected with lived experience.

Claudia Pond Eyley's *Earth Shield* (1984) is representative of this experiential knowledge, which for her held a deep sense of the continuum of time. The inclusion of the Paleolithic goddess figure, the Venus of Laussel, draws a connection with the modern Goddess movement and the idea of reclaiming ancient herstory – a personal sense of an ancient European genealogical connection with somatic and earth-centred spiritualities. *Earth Shield* draws a web of associations that celebrate a connectedness between women and herstory, affirming 'the elemental, biological, intellectual and spiritual strengths of women alongside the power of earth and nature.'<sup>6</sup>

Marté Szirmay's *Series B (10)* (1981) shares this sensibility with Eyley. The shell-like characteristic of this work makes a connection with Eyley's use of the cowrie shell, carrying with it, ideas associated with fertility and life-cycles: a connection between spiritual and physical growth. *Series B (10)* is an embodiment of the artist's enquiries into abstract natural form. Szirmay was interested in the idea of distilling or summarising the notion, or essence, of 'earth spirit' in her work.<sup>7</sup> For Szirmay, this particular series worked through a connection between the elemental and archetypal qualities of water and earth. While not directly associated with second-wave feminisms, she was contemporaneous with the women's art movement and her references to the feminine principle sometimes drew her into this context.

These works by Szirmay and Eyley both highlight a site of contention with regard to the question of gender essentialism: the idea that women and men have innate and fixed qualities or biological differences that define identity. Writing on Eyley's practice in the 1980s, art historian and curator Christina Barton recalls the question of essentialism that was of concern at the time. She writes:

Underlying this work is the affirmation of an essential 'femaleness' which is 'natural' in the sense that it is linked to the forces of nature...and in the sense that it is a position commonly shared by all women.<sup>8</sup>

One of Eyley's strongest critics was art writer Lita Barrie: 'When Claudia Pond-Eyley paints self-portraits against female icons she (re)duplicates the same structure men use to represent their self-worship.'<sup>9</sup>

Barrie, espousing feminist post-structuralist theory, argued that Eyley was not disruptive enough by simply perpetuating a gender binary.

Against the supposition of gender essentialism sits the idea that gender is socially constructed – formed through experiences of being and becoming in the world. The danger in conflating the use of matrilineal imagery with an overt essentialism (or feminine power with the biology of cis-women) is an important point. But it is also important to note that multiple sensibilities and critical intentions did and do abound. Accounting for personal contexts and motivations, and the specificities of individual practices, counters blanketed accusations.

## POSTMODERN FEMINISMS AND CONTEMPORARY EMBODIMENTS

In contrast to the approaches represented in Eyley and Szirmay, making use of the narratives and tropes of organised religion as a critical or revisionary strategy is another approach represented IN HER IMAGE. Within the frame of Christian tradition, Christine Webster's *Post-Crucifixion* (1988) deconstructs narrative with a semiotic spin and generates a 'new myth'.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps this figure is Mary Magdalene of the post-crucifixion narrative of Christ's resurrection? The archetypal Mary Magdalene has been depicted across the centuries as the reformed prostitute, the mystic, the feminist icon, and more recently revived as the matriarch of Christ's lineage (think Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*). Webster's work has often been interpreted through the lens of French feminist theory of the 1980s and 1990s, that saw the convergence of semiotic theory and psychoanalysis. This work shifts the markers of a definition of the sacred in relation to the body – where ultimately meaning is left up to the viewer.

Similarly, Margaret Dawson's *Kea. Nestor notabilis* (1990) is representative of postmodern feminist critique. With humour and pastiche, her photograph revises Leonardo Di Vinci's *The Last Supper*. It also recalls Mary Beth Edelson's iconic *Some Living American Women Artists/Last Supper* (1972), with Georgia O'Keeffe as Christ. Dawson, placing herself in Christ's seat, seems to reiterate Linda Nochlin's question: why have there been no great women artists?<sup>11</sup> Dawson addresses this question from the antipodes – the *Kea. Nestor notabilis* is a native bird of Aotearoa, found in or near the mountains of Te Wāi Pounamu, the South Island.<sup>12</sup>

Another approach that draws upon biblical narrative, is Shigeyuki (Yuki) Kihara's *Roman Catholic Church, Apia* (2013). Rich threads of enquiry converge in a post-colonial lamentation and critique of personal,

cultural and geographical contexts. In Victorian mourning dress, Kihara revises the biblical figure Salome, represented in Guidoccio Cozzarelli's *Dance of Salome* (c. 1470-1483). A meditation on the effects of colonialism from her perspective as Fa'afafine, Kihara's Salome is neither a *femme fatale* nor an innocent victim of the biblical text. She is an active witness to the present moment – 'a young ancient who stands at the interstices of the past, present and future.'<sup>13</sup>

Re-visioning and re-remembering continues in Sriwhana Spong's *a hook but no fish* (2017; 2020). Filmic and multi-layered in meaning, this work is an embodied visual immersion into herstory through the life and writing of the 12th century mystic Hildegard of Bingen. Spong's work highlights a turn to the question of women's experience within history and how that reflects on the current moment. Spong's interests manifest at the intersection of language, the body, female mysticism and personal heritage. Historical research is conducted through the lens of poetic imaginings with a focus on experiential knowledge. The mystical dimension of *a hook but no fish* is carried by an embodied and earthy aesthetics. The potency of Hildegard's metaphor of *viriditas* [greenness]<sup>14</sup> – for God, for woman and for the natural world and creative life – is matched by a soundtrack rich in bird and insect life, the sound of fire, water, and a beating heart.

Spong draws the French feminist writer and philosopher Hélène Cixous into conversation, drawing upon her notion of writing through the body as a practice that generates agency or as a means of communication. For Cixous, writing was voiced in the body.<sup>15</sup> Comparisons are also drawn between Hildegard's and Cixous's (re)naming endeavours – an endeavour in order to name the 'other', or to give the 'other' a voice. Hildegard re-wrote the Latin of her day through an experiential re-naming of her immediate world. While confined by the orthodoxy of her time, through Spong's film, Hildegard shows us that religious personal experience is political.

In this exhibition, the body and its connection to place, becomes a central focus of enquiry across personal, political, and spiritual concerns. This focus also presents ways of defining the sacred in relation to the body. To punctuate this point, Alicia Frankovich's *Rapture* (2010) references bodily movement in space, evoking an emotional or transcendent experience. While this work does not contain a literal or figurative reference to religious iconography or narrative, both its material and ethereal qualities can be interpreted as a convergence of the sacred and profane: suspended in abstract ecstasy, the work is drawn back down to earth by a mundane crumpled inside out white t-shirt.

## VOICES OF MANA WĀHINE

In the image of a body suspended in water, Rachael Rakena's (Ngāi Tahu, Ngā Puhi) *Iwidotnz 008* (2003) presents a deep connectivity with water and its associated te ao Māori cosmological narratives. The work has collective origins, forming part of her Toi Rerehiko<sup>16</sup> series that enfolded sensibilities of fluid space, immersion, movement, and the idea of a continuum. A cosmo-genealogical foundation is also imparted with a reference to Hawaiki – the collective source to which Māori return through water.<sup>17</sup>

The cosmological significance of whenua is distilled in Kura Te Waru Rewiri's (Ngāti Kahu, Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Kauwhata, Ngāti Rangī) *Untitled* (1990) – a work that rewrites abstraction as wāhi ngaro (unseen or lost spaces).<sup>18</sup>

Te Waru Rewiri's *Untitled* imparts a sense of the sacred through colour and symbolic form. The sacred colour red (whero; kura) forms a ground upon which is placed an arch of forest green. This work can be understood as deeply cosmological: the world of light, Te Ao Mārama, emerging from Te Kore (the realm of becoming) through Te Pō (the realm of darkness and night). For Te Waru Rewiri this knowledge is anchored in the body and whenua: 'I used to feel the earth, the mud, the sand, the stones, the water, the sea, the sun, those sorts of things and get lost in the silence of the tactile being of those elements.'<sup>19</sup>

Robyn Kahukiwa's (Ngāti Porou, Ngāti Hau, Ngāti Konohi, Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti) *Te Hā* (c. 1999) from her *Oriori* (lullaby) series, chronicles the birth of a child. From conception to birth, this series draws upon traditional waiata and narratives associated with the different stages of development and becoming. *Te Hā* translates as 'the breath', and in this work refers to the breathing required in the process of giving birth. The realm of the sacred is directly acknowledged through the matrilineal image of Hineteiwaiwa (the ancestor and deity in connection with childbirth and the realm of women), naming her as always present in the cycles of life. This work boldly depicts the very moment of birth, sitting in contrast with the sentimental and idealised depiction of motherhood in *Madonna and Child Enthroned*.

IN HER IMAGE contains a range of references to historical figures and narratives, called upon by the artists to explore, critique or witness across time – Garofalo's Virgin Mary, Kahukiwa's Hineteiwaiwa, Pond Elyey's Venus of Laussel, Kihara's Salome, and Spong's Hildegard of Bingen speak from the depths of historical, mythological and cultural contexts. While figures range in form and focus, shared concerns attach importance to embodiment, language and codes of



representation as means in which to consider spiritual and religious content and wider concerns.

Across the works, definitions of the sacred are formed in relation to representations of the body, to agency and language, and the deep significance of the natural world. Experiential and embodied spiritual sensibilities highlight the politicisation of religion, where the personal and the political are acknowledged as aligned with one's spiritual life. Experiential, exploratory, and te ao Māori knowledge systems, become spiritual foundations – the ground beneath one's feet, a land of one's own, or the affirmation of an intrinsic connection to whenua.

Postmodern feminisms and a contemporary historicism re-work the ground of inherited European religious narratives and iconography. Reading the 'Madonna and Child' alongside Webster and Dawson, for example, show the way that their work can be read as a foil to long established pictorial traditions or perceptions. References to wit and whimsy as a critical strategy are implicit, primarily within the postmodern gestures of Webster and Dawson and in the more recent work by Bush. Spong's *a hook but no fish* presents a layered and poetic exploration of the way language writes the body, drawing from the life and thought of a 12th century mystic.

Acknowledging questions that pertain to the realm of gender politics and the study of religion or spirituality is perhaps an implicit outcome of this exhibition, but the space to critically address these concerns sits outside its scope. Instead, the artists in IN HER IMAGE draw up their own (critical or affirmative) enquiries, reclamations and spiritual realities: from mana wāhine ways of knowing and being; to post-modern quotation and critique; to confluences of the sacred and profane in contemporary embodiments and medieval imaginings for the present moment. IN HER IMAGE presents a diversity of sacred herstory through the work of some of Aotearoa New Zealand's treasured artists housed in Ōtepoti Dunedin's rich heritage collections and beyond.

1. Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Vintage, 2000), 116.

2. *Mothers*, exhibition catalogue (Wellington: The Women's Gallery, 1981).

3. Heather McPherson, 'Heather McPherson' in *A Women's Picture Book* (Wellington: Government Printing Office, 1988), 40. McPherson's contribution to the opening of the Women's Gallery was a 'symbolic goddess figure' made with a faceless hairdresser's head with cut out blank face shapes for women to draw their own upon. As a summation of her ideas McPherson wrote about this work in the form of a poem, (*Having seen past the gods / their power, we make a goddess / ours...*) reproduced in the collection *A figurehead: a face* (Wellington: Spiral, 1982).

4. See Kathryn Rountree, 'The Past is a Foreigners' Country: Goddess Feminists, Archaeologists, and the Appropriation of Prehistory,'



- Journal of Contemporary Religion* 16(1):5-27. Pamela Russell, 'The Paleolithic Mother-Goddess: Fact or Fiction?', in *Reader in Gender Archaeology* edited by Kelley Hays-Gilpin and David S. Whitley (New York: Routledge), 261-268.
5. McPherson, *A Women's Picture Book*, 41.
  6. Aleyn Giles Peterson, 'Myth, Magic and Mystery: Recent Work by Claudia Pond Eyley', *Art New Zealand* 74, 64.
  7. From, Auckland Education Department cassette tape of a talk given by Marté Szirmay to the New Zealand Society of Sculptors, Painters and Associates (NZSSPA), 1983. Barbara Maré, 'Marté Szirmay: Paying Homage to the Organic', *Woman's Art Journal*, Autumn, 1989, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Autumn, 1989-Winter, 1990), 19-22, 21.
  8. Christina Barton, 'Claudia Pond Eyley: A Question of Representation,' *Art New Zealand* 36 (46-49): 48.
  9. Lita Barrie, 'Further Toward a Deconstruction of Phallic Univocality: Deferrals', *Antic* 2, March (1987), 32.
  10. The series from which this work originated was entitled *New Myths*.
  11. See Linda Nochlin's 1971 essay of the same name, which was formative for feminist art history and theory.
  12. Printed in *Antic* no. 7, June 1990. In this edition, Kea. Nestor *notabilis* (1990) sits alongside reproductions of Leonardo Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* engraved by R. Morghen after a drawing by Matteini, and the oil painting *The Meeting of the Artist and the Wounded Chief Hongi*, at the Bay of Islands, November 1827 c.1832 by Augustus Earle.
  13. N. Seja, 'The Past is a Foreign Climate: Shigeyuki Kihara Meets the Anthropocene,' *Art Monthly Australia* 285, 28-32. See <https://hdl.handle.net/10652/4044>
  14. Sarah L. Higley summarises the word as a metaphor 'with which [Hildegard] describes not only God's natural world, but all that is spiritually creative and filled with sap, the *sudor* of divine life, as opposed to the aridity of human sin'. Sarah L. Higley, *Hildegard of Bingen's Unknown Language: An Edition, Translation, and Discussion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 3.
  15. Hélène Cixous, Deborah Jenson (ed), *Coming to Writing and Other Essays* (Harvard University Press Cambridge MA, 1991), 52 in Spong, 'Strange and Irregular Practices,' in *Sriwhana Spong: H* (Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 2018), 23.
  16. The word *rehiko* is word play on *rorohiko*, for the word computer, which translates as 'electric brain' from *te reo Māori*.
  17. See Rachael Rakena in conversation with Bridget Reweti, *Uiuinga #3: a conversation with Rachael Rakena*. Viewed at <https://www.circuit.org.nz/blog/uiuinga-3-a-conversation-with-rachael-rakena> (08/10/2020).
  18. The concept can be defined as follows: 'Wāhi ngaro combines two words – wāhi (noun), meaning place, location, or an allocation; and ngaro (verb), to be hidden, out of sight, or absent (Moorfield, 2011). Wāhi ngaro then may mean 'lost place', referring to a place that is unseen and unknown. For this reason it may be interpreted as a place of supernatural and spiritual mystique; a 'world of gods and spirits, divine intervention, a place out of sight' (Moorfield, 2011). Belinda Borell and Kura Te Waru Rewiri et al. 'Beyond the veil: Kaupapa Māori gaze on the non-Māori subject', *Journal of Sociology, Special Issue - Indigenous Sociology: Contemporary Theoretical Perspectives*, Volume: 56 issue: 2 (197-212) <https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783319893503> Citations include J. C. Moorfield, Te aka: Maori-English, English-Maori dictionary and Index, new expanded edn (Auckland: Pearson, 2011) in *Ibid*.
  19. See Huhana Smith, *New Zealand Art at Te Papa* (Te Papa Press, 2018). Retrieved from <https://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/object/36517>