



Republic of Clay and Steel

Rangi Kipa's Maorist Architecture



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An Interview

by

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“The arms of the ancestors spread protectively over this mansion of clay and steel. These arms romantically and dutifully embrace new writings and old proverbs containing ethnic, international, and global cultural paraphernalia: some aquatic, others terrestrial, or celestial, or made out of innumerable and indefinite breeds and blends of things familiar and strange. Alphabets and letters in dramatic fonts and invocative colors fill the belly of the mansion, like food, water, blood, tissues, and membranes. These are also voices from the past and the future, from the invisible bends in the cycle of life surrounding us in mysterious spiritual connections, waves, and radiations. The gable is the spine of the house, like the backbone of the ancestors. Shield-like massive ribs radiate from this central spine than runs through the entire length of the mansion, uniting and fusing the two symbolic chambers into one composite entity, one global body language, like universal human body electricity.”

Rangi Kipa, Denver, Colorado, September 18, 2007.





Rangi Kipa's work is not Maori art, but Maorist art. His images do not directly come from Maori visual culture, but from a philosophical architecture that reconstructs and deconstructs Maori worldview, and may be called Maorism. Kipa's art is Maorist because he inscribes the visual vocabulary of the indigenous Maori people, and transcends this ethnic boundary by enlisting influences from all over the globe, to produce a commonwealth of visual conscriptions, tattooed with a distinctively Maori calligraphic flourish.

Born in 1966 in the South Sea region of New Zealand, Kipa makes work that blends an intellectual grounding in self art criticism with the mysterious dynamism of the creative process. His work is driven by a solid theoretical understanding of Maori history, culture and art, in addition to his knowledge of international visual culture, partly because he is a trained sociologist, but also because of his energetic philosophical curiosity. The aesthetic reflections behind his work are manifest in his drive for technical perfection, and he has become an icon of technical excellence in the annals of contemporary art in New Zealand.





Kipa attended college after studying for a diploma in an ethnographic art school, where he mastered the indigenous art of Maori sculpture. Studying within the ethnic pedagogy of the apprentice system, he learnt to sculpt in bones and wood, and developed an impressive command of the extensive Maori visual repertoire. In college he studied Maori languages, sociology and ethnology, which added a linguistic, theoretical, and philosophical substrata to his creativity. When he did his graduate work in sculpture, he had begun to grapple with some of the emotional and intellectual struggles of moving from Maori to Maorist artistry. The curiosity of his mind is leading him along a long journey that moved him from the ideas he developed as a young man, to the present milestone where he is discovering and developing a different aesthetic landscape. He has arrived at a creative crossroads, where he sees himself moving away from an aesthetic position grounded in indigenous tradition, to a less secure experimental trajectory, where he begins to discover new materials, to explore new ideas, to reach larger, unknown, unpredictable, audiences. He responds with more obtuse, monumental, and unpredictable constructions that critically locate his creative residence within the indefinite geography of globalizing visual culture.





A complication of his relocation from an ethnic micro-aesthetic to a global macro-aesthetic is a transgression for which he pays through voluntary alienation. The drama of his dislocation from ethnic to the global visual theatre is a literal Oedipal psycho-mythography, because his father is Maori and his mother of Scottish descent. This tragic compulsion to sacrifice the Maori to attain the Maorist is a universal choreography to which all artists of indigenous descent must perform. Art is the insatiable Salome that always demands no less than the head of her prophet, in the name of a brief dance that dies like a flicker of light.

There is always a silent call to the ethnographic artist to migrate, leave all known mythographic territories and emigrate to distant iconic diasporas, crossing all boundaries and wrecking barriers in this psychic and physical transgression. But, then, there is the bird that always sings of home, within the silent alienation of self-constructed diasporas, it sings of Tino Ranga Tiratanga, in one universal language it repeats, over and over again, “home is home, north or south.”





Kipa's work at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver, shows a bold exploration of his new philosophical ideas in the form of a house that he installs in one of the galleries, for the opening of the new permanent building of the museum. I describe the house as a mansion of clay and steel. To understand this metaphor, one must read the following neo-platonic dialogue. I spoke with Ranji Kipa several times, including numerous international calls from the United States to New Zealand, and direct talks in Denver, Colorado.

Let's begin with the Denver house. This is your first project in the US?

I've had other exhibitions in the US. I've had works in traveling shows in museums and galleries in America, with my work rotating to a couple of venues including Miami and New York. My wife also curated a show that traveled quite a bit in the United States.

Is your wife an artist?

She is an artist and a curator as well. She has curated a number of shows.

Do both of you collaborate sometimes on the same work?





We have never sat down to deliberately collaborate, but it would be wrong of me to say that she does not have an influence on what I do. We cross-fertilize each other's ideas. We critique each other just as a normal part of our practice.

Who is your audience when you make art?

Initially, I addressed my immediate community, the Maori community. But later I moved my narratives to address a wider audience.

The Maori community is no longer your only audience?

No, far from it. Many of the things I do now may seem quite obscure to a Maori audience. But ultimately, a lot of my work is inspired by Maori material culture. But my work is often cutting-edge, pushing cultural boundaries.

Where were you born?

I was born in New Zealand. Christ Church, in the South Island.

What do you find inspiring as an artist in the place where you grew up?





I grew up really in my traditional homeland. We moved there from the South island where I was born when I was only a year old.

Must have been remarkable.

It was an important period in New Zealand history. The government was spending a lot of energy to move the Maori from the rural areas to urban places. It was a government initiative to move them into different trades, and my father was one of the first beneficiaries of this initiative in the early sixties.

Interesting.

It was phenomenal. For this initiative, my dad had moved from the North Island to the South Island. The government had divided parts of the North Island into various jurisdictions. All the indigenes that applied for what was called “Trade Training” were sent to particular places for their training. All the people from the West Coast where my father was from were sent to the South Island. My father was sent there and he trained to become a carpenter. It was there in Christ Church, the main city, that my father met my mother. I was born there. After he finished his training one year later in 1967, he returned to his place of origin.





Your mother returned with him?

Yes. She is Pakeha, the Maori term for persons of European descent. She is of Scottish descent.

Is inter-racial marriage common?

In the early sixties, during this phenomenal movement of Maoris around the country, a significant number of inter-racial marriages happened. The interaction of Maoris with Europeans at this time encouraged many Maoris to develop romantic relationships with the Europeans.

It was not viewed with suspicion by most people in New Zealand?

No. Right from the time Europeans arrived in New Zealand, Maori people sought to marry them into the community because of the social and economic advantages that such marriages brought to the tribes. It was mutually beneficial because the Europeans were able to trade with the Maori. There were competitions among Maori groups about which could marry the largest number of European settlers. Or at least you wanted European settlers to reside within your tribal boundaries, because they provided easy access to desirable European industrial goods.





How did Europeans react to this indigenous desire?

At the beginning, they were highly reliant on the Maoris for most of their needs. Many of them could not have survived without this system of co-dependency. Many of the Europeans were wheelers and dealers who had no philosophical problems with developing relationships with the indigenous people and mingling with them. The gentries who arrived had issues with developing relationships with the Maori. But most of those who arrived were of the rough cut, and had no problems with inter-racial courtship and marriages. They enjoyed it.

Did this relationship change later on?

Oh yes for sure. When the first wave of Europeans came in to try and acquire large strips of land, and ended up deceiving the indigenous people who had no real sense of European understanding of land sale. The Maori were told they had sold lands that they did not think they had sold. There were no Maori customs of selling lands. There were customs of exchanging and passing off land. The land was the main connection to the sources of food, and the idea is that the land is inalienable. Even though you might part with a piece of land, you still retained the right to collect from the present occupiers, owners or tribes.





The implications of European land sale harmed the initial friendly relationship with the Maoris. And because the Maori could not stop the massive influx of European immigration, at a time when there were no immigration regulations, and the Europeans simply ran around out of control. They behaved licentiously, and with the introduction of crimes, diseases, and social problems like alcoholism, the system of mutual trust and romantic relationships pretty much collapsed. There were wholesale purchasing of land from people who were not necessarily owners, or with the right to sell. All these changed the inter-racial relationships, and cause the land war raging in New Zealand.

So you have multiple heritages, consisting of indigenous Maori and European elements?

Yes.

Are you questioned in New Zealand as not being Maori enough because of your multiple heritages?

Not as much. The contrary is actually the truth because of my physical appearance. It is easy for me to claim and promote my Maori heritage because I look Maori. I really do not look like a product of inter-racial marriage. And I do not look European.





The way I was brought up, my body language, and the way I speak identify me as Maori. And because of the under-dog factor in the Maori-European relationship, I have preferred to emphasize my Maori identity.

Are you a Maori artist?

Lately I've not been identifying myself this way. There is no need for me to prove or demonstrate being Maori any more. At the time that I grew up, the education system was different, because our language was not available or taught in the schools. Indigenous Maori cultural expressions especially in the arts had died out pretty much. We have experienced a cultural renaissance in the last twenty-five years, and I have been fortunate enough to grow up in this cultural renaissance, where I have been able to engage with my language.

How did this phenomenon happen?

The European cultural imperialism of Maori culture, in all of its manifestations, did a lot of damage to the Maori people in the last three generations. This damage has motivated the Maori people to undertake initiatives of cultural recovery. . Our communities initiated language revival programs, and a whole of other things accompanied this recovery efforts.





It affected the revival in the culture in general, because the visual arts, the performance arts and all those languages were part of the stabilizing forces that maintained the cultural identity of the communities. In the last one hundred years or so, the government has pushed its own imperial agenda through European-based education and such things. But I've been lucky enough to grow up in the generation that has resisted these imperial forces, and has managed to create its own theoretical paradigms.

Your work has images that one could regard as Maori.

I have a fascination with ethnographic Maori art because they are clearly beautiful in design and dynamic in form, whatever their role or functions might be. I have skill in Maori art. I have spent some time exploring some of those forms. I enjoy doing this because I am on top on my game with it.

But your work has other things that are clearly not traditional Maori symbols.

True. The problem with constantly exploring ethnographic art is that it locks us up within some traditional paradigm that I believe is not healthy. Our values change. We cannot look back to the time before the arrival of the Europeans and say, "This is the classical Maori period."





There is a problem with saying that that time was the epitome of Maori society. Values change and societies are dynamic. The values of the people before Europeans arrived were different from what we have now. This is why I no longer want to be rigid, or call myself strictly a Maori artist. When we were developing those resistance ideologies, New Zealand was really quite insular. Much of world was really insular. It was pre-global economy. With the end of the Cold War, when different economies of the world began to interact more freely, it is important for us to be changing our perspective. New Zealand is geographically isolated. We were also politically and economically isolated up to the time global economy began to kick in. We were extremely late on the scene before we started participating in it. But things have changed. My concerns now are different from what they were fifteen or twenty years ago.

But you once described your work as Maori resistance art?

My work still refers to the iniquities—or shall we say inequality or the lack of equity—in the Maori world and the non-Maori world in New Zealand. What the Maori have been struggling for in the last twenty years is the equitable right to stand on their own land. Before this we were seeking the right to be citizens on our own land.





We had our own languages, and lost so much. But now I don't think our communities speak about the real issues that are challenging us. Now, the crown is not our worst enemy. We are our own worst enemy. We really need to liberate ourselves from our own ideology. These ideologies got us to where we are now. But we need to change our theory. We must change with the time, and not hold on rigidly to the past.

How?

When we were developing the resistance ideology as part of our civil rights activities, we relied on the infallibility of tribal authority or what we called Tino Ranga Tiratanga. This concept introduced tribal authority almost in conflict with the crown. It was an important and critical moment in the struggles of the Maori people. It was also a difficult period of deprivation and oppressions at levels beyond what many of the Maori people of today, especially the young ones, can understand. The difficult times called for difficult solutions.

Such as?

One of our historical resistance heroes, Te Whiti, introduced a metaphor for engaging the forces of occupation. He said "E kore te Uku e piri ki te Rino." This means clay will never stick to steel.





Clay symbolizes the Maori people, and steel symbolizes the Europeans. The implication is that the two peoples and cultures will not intermingle. This strategy and position was necessary at that time, because of the adversity that the people faced. These and other similar ideas encouraged people to stick together in the face of adversity. But things have changed. I am pretty much now in control of my destiny. We as a people cannot continue to maintain a siege mentality, now that there is nobody attacking us.

What about ideas that are ancestral? Are those still valid?

Using these old ideas are good up to a point. It is important to know them. But we cannot be limited by them. We need new intellectual and spiritual journeys, Our world is now quite secular. We cannot ignore this fact.

But if these ideas exist in the present as well, and we use them, can we be regarded as going to the past to retrieve them?

I struggle with the European concept of time as linear progression. I struggle with these western ideas of time and direction. Our Maori concept of time is cyclical. There are unseen parts of time, unseen parts of the cyclic direction.





In-between spaces that defy visibility and definitions?

Absolutely. Unseen parts exist because of the shape of the circle. It is always bending and always moving, so you cannot see everything at once from the same point. These unseen points are the places where art comes from. You can connect with it but you may not see it. It transcends western ideas of physics and biology, beyond animation. In Maori art, we have no sort of thing as animate and inanimate. Everything is animated by the unseen spirit inside it.

But this returns us to the Maori tradition from which we are trying to escape.

We cannot escape it. We are not trying to escape it. We are only saying that we will not allow it to marginalize us. We have it, so we use it. We must not allow it to limit our thinking, and become the boundary that we will never cross. Our people have been traveling since the contact. They quite easily slotted us within the Darwinian hierarchy, right at the bottom as the noble savage. They entertained our ambassadors in the House of Lords. There were tales of the lavish receptions that our leaders received in the British Parliament. They cultivated the gentry ego. Our strength lies in mingling with others, not in isolating ourselves.





Maori traditions can imprison Maori people?

It could become a trap. For many young people, it has already become a trap. You see, we are a warrior race. It is easy for people to see things only in terms of confrontation, for people to want to get up and fight. Sometimes the enemy within is stronger than the enemy outside, but it is easier to project your problem on others as the cause of your troubles. It is more difficult to question yourself, to fight the demons inside you.

How do you recognize the demons inside, if you cannot even see them?

That is the problem. They are invisible, but they are there, these demons. But you must be careful not to become their victims. One of the reasons I moved away from the homeland is so I can better engage the demons within. One of these demons is the way we now use our music, such an important, emotionally compelling aspects of our culture. Ninety-nine per cent of the songs we sing were generated during the land wars. This is depressing. It dampens your mind, tempers your brain, and limits your thinking. It is oppressive.





Strong words. How so?

We are now the perfect victims of our enemies. We now want a share of the land. People are now waiting for their own claim of the land. The concept of the crown giving us things is a materialistic idea. Money cannot heal our pain. These pains are not only physical. They are also psychological and emotional pains. Only you know the basis of your pain, how much it hurts, and exactly where it hurts. Only you can heal yourself. Others may help you, but only you will know when the pain is over. You are the only one who can tell the pain to go away, or you will become part of the pain itself.

How?

I chose to be a part of the solution rather than a part of the problem. Otherwise, history will keep repeating itself. The same tragedies that led us to this pain are re-emerging. Only we can liberate ourselves. There is something wrong with our rhetoric. We have not yet examined and critiqued our concepts. We still think of the pre-contact period as the best of all times. This view is too romantic. It is not reflective. Any society that is healthy continues to reinvent itself. Not live in any romanticized and self-invented past. I tell the young ones that they must stop creating a past that fits their own fantasy





of seeing what things should be, rather than seeing things for what things really were. The struggle must move forward. The struggle now is about choice: choosing who you are, and who you want to be.

Maori youths can now mould their own heads, and fashion their own destinies?

And stop complaining or reacting, because it is time to become proactive.

Time to build a new architecture, like the one you are constructing in the Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver?

It is a house, and also my own self-portrait.

A visual autobiography?

Here I ask myself the question, if I were a house looking at myself in a mirror, what images, what illusions, what reflections, what inflections and deflections, would I see?

So I made a house with two faces, of clay and steel, thus subverting the reactive Te Whiti metaphor. In this new architecture, clay and steel naturally mingle, in a proactive metaphor that knows no such boundaries.





After all, isn't steel also clay? And if left long enough in clay, will steel not turn to clay?

Exactly. In New Zealand, this is being demonstrated because cultures of clay and steel intermingle seamlessly everyday, defying all nationalist and intellectual terms and taboos. This intermingling is natural, therefore it is not without its own contradictions and tensions. My mansion here in the museum is a good example.

How so?

It is about my freedom to make myself in my own reflection. Unlike the indigenous Maori house that always has a room, this new architecture has two rooms. The human body is a house, physically and spiritually, like flesh and bone, blood and water. The house is both physical and terrestrial, ancestral and living, visible and invisible. The duality that this house constructs implies a multiplicity that enables you to think beyond the polar differences, and reflect more within the innumerable grey areas and layers of possibilities.

How is this shown in the architecture?

The arms of the ancestors spread protectively over this mansion of clay and steel. These arms romantically and dutifully





embrace new writings and old proverbs containing ethnic, international, and global cultural paraphernalia, some aquatic, others terrestrial, or celestial, or made out of innumerable and indefinite breeds and blends of things familiar and strange. Alphabets and letters in dramatic fonts and invocative colors fill the belly of the mansion, like food, water, blood, tissues, and membranes. These are also voices from the past and the future, from the invisible bends in the cycle of life surrounding us in mysterious spiritual connections, waves, and radiations. The gable is the spine of the house, like the backbone of the ancestors. Shield-like massive ribs radiate from this central spine than runs through the entire length of the mansion, uniting and fusing the two symbolic chambers into one composite entity, one global body language, like universal human body electricity.

Are you suggesting that the Maori culture is now a mother that opens her arms to the world, like a twenty-first century secular Madonna? Has the world gone Maorist?

The Maori culture is now nurturing the entire world. It is significant that as elaborate as the new mansion that I have constructed is, the architecture is not locked down. It is mobile, therefore it is not about land claim, or about land war. We have gone beyond this landscape. For me, land is no more important.





The most important things are now family and community. And the world is now my community. I am no longer limited by ethnic nationalism.

Why?

Look around you. The Maori culture has branded the entire world. I see Maori tattoos and their variations everywhere in the world. The Maori culture is visually colonizing the globe. We need not continue to struggle any longer. We now need a new paradigm than is less aggressive. When I was growing up, Maoris did not go to the university. Things have changed, because Maori youths consider it their inalienable right to obtain university degrees, up to the doctorate level. We need to recognize what we have already achieved. This is the only way we can move forward from where we are, so that we do not get stuck, and become victims of our own rhetorical weapons. We need to take a good look at ourselves, and ask, if I were a house, what would I look like?

In the mansion that Kipa constructs at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver, he shows us what he sees when he looks at the “body electric” of his own house. The body electric is not limited to any traditional definition of the body, as consisting of the four humors in the Greco-Roman tradition. Kipa has reconstructed his own Republic in this mansion.





Kipa's metaphoric architectural Republic includes a more Aristotelian Maorism, with the romantic avant gardism of Delacroix, and the existentialist nihilism of Nietzsche. The first enables him to open up the edifice to all and sundry; the second allows him to cast a colonial gaze on the entire world as his visual cultural terra nullius; the third licenses him to create freely without taboo and care, to change traditional vocabularies, words, worlds, and phrasings, to fit within his autographic metropolitan republic of clay and steel.

