



Opening night
of 'Headlands:
Thinking Through
New Zealand
Art', Museum
of Contemporary
Art Australia (MCA),
Sydney, 1992.
Courtesy MCA

Rethinking ‘Headlands’

– Christina Barton

‘Headlands’ is more than an exhibition of New Zealand art. It is an experimental model for cultural dialogue, concerning differences and similarities between two countries.

– Leon Paroissien, 1992¹

Over twenty years ago, on 1 April 1992, ‘Headlands: Thinking Through New Zealand Art’ opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. This was the first major international exhibition in the MCA’s newly refurbished landmark building on Sydney’s iconic Circular Quay. With 30 artists and 128 works, ‘Headlands’ was the most substantial exhibition of New Zealand modern and contemporary art to ever leave the country’s shores, and one of the very few to grapple head on with the complexities of its bicultural inheritance. Put together by a consortium of New Zealand and Australian curators, it marks an extraordinary moment in the art histories of both nations, as well as exposing the internal tensions within New Zealand culture and the fraught cultural dynamics of the era.

From an Australian perspective, ‘Headlands’ was an unexpected move. New Zealand, so close and supposedly familiar, hardly seemed ‘international’ in any real sense. Because the two nations shared a colonial history of British occupation, there appeared little need to delve into their differences. Mostly, in fact, the bigger country simply ignored its smaller

Christina Barton revisits the exhibition ‘Headlands’, finding in it a model for transnational and critically local exhibition-making.

neighbour. Why, then, should this brand new museum, in its striking harbour-front setting, choose to launch its international programme with such an exhibition? Furthermore, ‘Headlands’ was staged along with ‘Tyerabarrbowaryaou: I Shall Never Become a White Man’, an exhibition

of contemporary Aboriginal art curated by Fiona Foley and Djon Mundine, and it preceded ‘Mao Goes Pop: China Post-1989’ (1993), the first exhibition of contemporary Chinese art to be seen outside China. Together these projects at the MCA mapped a cultural domain quite other to that of the Western mainstream, situating the institution’s European and North American holdings in relation to pointedly regional and non-Western coordinates.²

The inaugural director Leon Paroissien and chief curator Bernice Murphy were responsible for the focus and vision of the new museum. In a historic building located not far from the site of the first fleet’s landfall in 1788, the first point of contact between Aboriginal and European peoples, and connected to the bustling port that had once had close maritime links to New Zealand, the pair developed a programme that responded to the symbolism of this highly significant site. ‘Headlands’ and ‘Tyerabarrbowaryaou’ were powerful, stake-in-the-ground statements designed to address the historical inequities of centre-periphery politics and the prejudicial myopia of dominant (white) power structures. Each and together, they spoke for a new kind of site-sensitive exhibition-making that could nuance and counter the field in which international contemporary art circulated.

Unlike many Australians, Paroissien and Murphy had developed a deep-seated interest in New Zealand, which they saw as the ideal test case for their critically regionalist

1 Leon Paroissien, ‘Director’s Foreword’, *Headlands: Thinking Through New Zealand Art* (exh. cat.), Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992, p.6.

2 While collectively these projects warrant analysis for the statement they make about the MCA’s original vision, ‘Headlands’ is the focus here. The exhibition’s particular complexities uniquely inflected postcolonial art history in the 1990s, but its local character has never before been examined in the pages of an international journal.

perspective. Over a ten-year period they became intrigued by the inward-looking intensity and cross-cultural dynamics peculiar to the small and ostensibly cohesive culture, tracking in particular a resurgent Maori art, with its double mission of reviving customary forms in the context of the marae (the social space around which Maori life is organised) and adapting traditional motifs and subjects to Western formats and contexts.

Sensitive to the cultural dynamics of ‘import’ shows, they stepped back from the curatorial process, establishing a committee to define the thematic concepts and finalise the selection. This was comprised of John McCormack, then director of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, a contemporary art museum in provincial New Zealand, as chair; Murphy, as the Australian representative; New Zealand curator Robert Leonard; museum director Cheryll Sotheran; and artist Cliff Whiting, head of Te Waka Toi, the Maori division within the Arts Council of New Zealand. This collective approach was underscored by the show’s being supported by both New Zealand’s and Australia’s arts councils and by plans for the exhibition to additionally travel to three New Zealand venues.

Murphy used her introduction in the ‘Headlands’ catalogue to set out her guiding philosophy for the kind of exhibition practice she believed should underpin the new institution. Listing the ‘Seven Deadening Sins of Restrictive Vision’ – proprietorship, dilution, canonical representation, avant-gardism, novelty, exoticism and universalisation – she provided a toolkit for a different model of international exchange that would avoid self-colonisation, be open to complexity, capable of testing established thinking and attentive to contextual specificities.³ In anatomising these ‘sins’, Murphy acknowledged that the MCA did not ‘seek merely to take its place in that hall of mirrors through which international art institutions reflect a globally interconnecting, seamless, specular world’ but to instead ‘question and contribute to the range of thinking as now exists’.⁴

Murphy’s vision for the museum needs to be seen against the background of the postcolonial debates that marked the decade both internationally and regionally. As Australian instigator of the ‘Headlands’ exhibition, she self-consciously removed herself from certain aspects of the project, leaving the analysis of the show’s contents

Taking shape around the poles of a ‘deconstructive’ postmodernism and a ‘reconstructive’ postcolonialism, the exhibition and its reception were galvanised by these debates.

and its broader historical context to the New Zealand-based curators and local contributors to the publication. They, in turn, used the occasion to map the evolution of the nation as a complex modern society in which a once-proudly British-settler colony had loosened its ties to the old country and reoriented its attention to North America, Asia and the Pacific, and where a resurgent Maori populace was more forcefully seeking political restitution

and cultural revival. The ratification of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1990 symbolised New Zealand’s formal recognition of its bicultural status and granted the Waitangi Tribunal authority to settle historic Maori land claims;⁵ and during the time it took for ‘Headlands’ to be realised, the National Art Gallery was transformed into the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa – the country’s first properly bicultural national cultural institution. More broadly, the early 1990s were characterised by the wider cultural turn sparked by such exhibitions as ‘Magiciens de la Terre’ at the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Grande Halle de La Villette in Paris in 1989;⁶ the critical tools of postcolonial theory opened the way for a new breed of articulate and argumentative artists, curators and art historians, who entered into debates around the vexed questions of identity and cultural appropriation, and who sought alternative cultural coordinates to those previously imposed upon them.

3 Bernice Murphy, ‘Figuring Culture: Introduction to *Headlands*’, in *Headlands: Thinking through New Zealand Art*, *op. cit.*, pp.9–12.

4 *Ibid.*, p.10.

5 The Treaty of Waitangi was the document that ceded sovereignty to the British Crown in 1840 and its ratification in 1990 coincided with the 150th year of its original signing. It was agreed to by several but not all Māori tribal leaders. The nuances of its wording, drafted in both English and Māori, continues to exercise legal and political minds and remains a point of contention. The existence of this document, and its force as a founding contract between Europeans and Māori, is a fundamental difference between Australia and New Zealand.

6 For more on this exhibition, see Lucy Steeds et al., *Making Art Global (Part 2): ‘Magiciens de la Terre’ 1989*, London: Afterall Books, 2013.



Rita Angus, *Fay and Jane Birkinshaw*, 1938, oil on canvas, 34 × 67cm, Rita Angus Loan Collection, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. Courtesy Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, reproduced with permission of Rita Angus Estate

Overleaf:
Installation view, 'Headlands: Thinking Through New Zealand Art', Museum of Contemporary Art Australia (MCA), Sydney, 1992. Pictured, from left to right, are works by Shona Rapira-Davies, Colin McCahon, Bill Culbert & Ralph Hotere and Cliff Whiting. Courtesy MCA

This was the maelstrom into which 'Headlands' was cast. Taking shape around the poles of a 'deconstructive' postmodernism and a 'reconstructive' postcolonialism, the exhibition and its reception were galvanised by these debates.⁷ These notions were not easy bedfellows, but together they set a path at odds with both internationalist and nationalist positions that had privileged white male artists working in the dominant genres of expressive realism and modernist abstraction. The curators eschewed chronology as an organising principle and even broke up the works of individual artists across different thematic groupings; a notion of cultural interchange underpinned many of the arrangements. The groupings ranged from an exploration of spirituality (in a section called 'With Spirit'), to a selection of substantial works that addressed various symbolic engagements with place ('Headlands'), to rooms devoted to a belated and quirky history of local artists' taking up of modernist art ('Mod Cons') and a critique of the social conformism attendant upon New Zealand's embrace of welfarism in the modern era ('Model Behaviour/Self Defence'), to spaces set aside for the presentation of surviving Māori customary practices ('Turangawaewae') and cross-cultural interaction ('Inside Out'). The most urgent work in the exhibition was by artists — both Māori and Pakeha (the term used locally for New Zealanders of European descent) — who treated cultural difference and intercultural exchange as their subjects.

The earliest work in the exhibition, Rita Angus's striking 1938 painting *Fay and Jane Birkinshaw*, one of the Australian audience's 'discoveries' in the show, struck an early chord in the room devoted to 'model behaviour'. In the portrait, two young girls in identical checked dresses and green cardigans gaze intensely ahead at the picture's viewer. In the charged context of the exhibition, the multi-ethnic dolls in national costumes that sit on a shelf behind the pair, also staring out, became totems of otherness, collected with acquisitive pleasure by a dominant white culture because of their taxonomic variety and exoticism. The hard-edged but transfigured realism of this work, one of several by

⁷ In using these terms, I acknowledge Louise Garrett, who through them structured her analysis 'Reading Headlands', unpublished master's thesis, Wellington: Victoria University of Wellington, 1997.







Angus that were included, typified a significant portion of the paintings in the exhibition, including those by later artists such as Michael Illingworth, Jeffrey Harris, Michael Smither and W.D. Hammond.

Colin McCahon – whose work had provided the initial impetus for Paroissien and Murphy to undertake ‘Headlands’ – was represented by ten works, scattered throughout the show.⁸ McCahon, widely recognised in New Zealand as the canonical ‘master’ of the modern period, offered a model for a kind of practice that could counter both the outmoded nationalist discourses of the colonial inheritance of Australia and New Zealand and the structural inequalities still at work in an increasingly globalised art world. His striking early images of a pared back but highly recognisable New Zealand landscape peopled with biblical figures, and later ones involving overlaid words borrowed from the scriptures, local poets or Māori oratory and song, were placed alongside works by Cliff Whiting and Shona Rapira Davies. The latter two figures belong to a separate but parallel trajectory of first and second generation Māori artists who have respectively retold mythological tales in a contemporary language, reimagining social rituals for a modern world. Their works were shown together with the collaborative installations of Ralph Hotere, known for his wilful refusal to be defined by his Māori identity, and Bill Culbert, a New Zealand-born, British-based sculptor; Hotere and Culbert’s works, in corrugated iron, fluorescent lights and paua (abalone) shells, merged and blurred their individual practices and redeployed the language of Minimalism to figure natural sites that were threatened by encroaching industry. Such complex juxtapositions were carefully choreographed by the curators as points and counterpoints, in a play of competing, overlapping and contradictory readings.

Installation view, ‘Headlands: Thinking Through New Zealand Art’, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia (MCA), Sydney, 1992. Pictured, from left to right, are works by Paratene Matchitt, Gordon Walters and Michael Parekowhai. Courtesy MCA

⁸ Paroissien and McMurphy had previously presented ‘I Will Need Words’, an exhibition of Colin McCahon’s word and number paintings, curated by Wystan Curnow, at the Power Gallery of Contemporary Art, as part of the Biennale of Sydney in 1984. ‘Headlands’ was initiated in large part to contextualise McCahon’s achievement by drawing attention to his contemporaries and to consider the myriad ways in which his example has been tackled, translated or even contested.

One of the most telling features of the contribution made by lead curator, the irreverent, quick-witted and sharp-tongued Robert Leonard, was his insertion of works by a younger generation of artists who developed their practices in the critical climate that then prevailed and brought to the show their own reflexive contributions to the exhibition's thematics. Leonard placed, for example, McCahon's *I Am* (1954) – a small canvas with the letters of the work's title painted as faceted planes to thus render the words illogically concrete (in Leonard's estimation an instance of McCahon's productive misreading of the cubist idiom) – across from a free-standing sculptural version of the same words by the youngest artist in the show, Michael Parekowhai, titled *The Indefinite Article* (1990). Parekowhai added to the simple statement 'I AM' a third and most substantial word 'HE', which to English speakers pointedly redefined McCahon's declarative statement as symptomatically patriarchal, but which to Maori could mean both 'some' and 'wrong', so countering McCahon's singular statement with an idea of collectivity inherent in Maori society.

Parekowhai appeared, too, in perhaps the most contentious room in the exhibition, titled 'Inside Out', where artists of different generations and cultural backgrounds were brought together to represent the various ways in which indigenous motifs have been retooled to invigorate and transform both Maori and European art. This space included paintings by Rita Angus, Michael Illingworth, Dennis Knight Turner, Theo Schoon and Gordon Walters as examples of the local 'primitivist' impulse amongst European artists that gave rise to an indigenous variant of international modernism, juxtaposed with works by Maori 'modernists' Paratene Matchitt and Sandy Adsett, who invented new modes of representation that brought customary forms into Western art contexts. Parekowhai's three-dimensional word piece *Everyone Will Live Quietly' Micah 4:4* (1990), set out on the floor like a Minimalist sculpture as a mock injunction to social unity, provided an ironic subtext to undercut any possibility of teleological development, and to problematise the suggestion of a seamless 'nativising' tradition.

And so the juxtapositions went on, proving how productive slippages within and between the two different cultures could define the nation's art. By and large the show's strategies were successful. 'Headlands' garnered positive reviews from Australian critics, and audiences were intrigued by the range of works, many of which they had never previously seen. As Sydney-based critic Joanna Mendelsohn put it:

Probably every culture needs the kind of cool and deliberately distant analysis that 'Headlands' has given New Zealand. Because those who dictate questions on art in most countries operate in a very small circle, it is hard for a curator to work on any exhibition of living artists' work without coming under the pressure of mateship. The New Zealand curators of 'Headlands' ... have performed an extraordinary feat in moving away from local allegiances. Perhaps they could join again with Murphy and select an Australian exhibition with similar rigour and give us new insights into our own culture.⁹

Who would have thought that Australians would ever have contemplated inviting their 'uncool' neighbours across the Tasman to assess Australian culture? This new openness to the other is a tribute to the efforts of Paroissien and Murphy, who, for a brief moment in the early years of the MCA, created a liminal space in which fixed identities and established power relations were momentarily disrupted by means of the careful negotiation of proximity and difference.

Yet New Zealanders' reception of 'Headlands' was markedly different. In stark contrast to the positive reviews by Australian critics, locals responded negatively to the flip tone of the wall texts, the omission of several canonical figures, the eccentric elevation of previously minor players and the quirky selection of unrepresentative works by major artists. All of this may seem par for the course for such a show – as Mendelsohn had knowingly remarked, it is hard to please everyone, especially in a small, tight art scene like New Zealand's. However, the attacks were partisan, emanating on the one hand from nationalist critics, like Hamish Keith, who were dismayed by the exclusion of expressive

9 Joanna Mendelsohn, 'Headlands: The Sydney View', *Art New Zealand*, no.64, Spring 1992, p.58.



painters whose works were thought to capture the deeper ‘spirit’ of place and, on the other, from modernists, like Francis Pound and Michael Dunn, who were alarmed by the cooptation of art as a discursive tool to convey complex social, cultural and political meanings.

This latter contingent (joined by artist Richard Killeen and academic Laurence Simmons) were especially critical of the treatment of senior abstract artist Gordon Walters, for the ways in which he was used to represent the Pakeha side of the intercultural exchange around which the exhibition hinged. Particularly vociferous was the opprobrium heaped upon one of the essayists in the catalogue, the young Maori curator Rangihiroa Panoho, who singled out Walters’s use of the koru, a curving bulbous motif adapted from Maori rafter painting, or kowhaiwhai, in his exceptionally refined abstract paintings. Panoho saw Walters as insensitively taking from Maori culture without sufficient acknowledgement of its social and cultural meanings. While the attacks were couched in the language of propriety, concerning a lack of respect shown to a senior figure especially in the context of an ‘export’ exhibition, they signalled a deeper unrest, a cultural anxiety catalysed by the occasion that is a marker of the volatility of the moment in New Zealand’s emergence as a bicultural nation.

The local reception of ‘Headlands’ upset accepted notions that New Zealand was a cohesive society enjoying settled race relations and cultural consensus. Murphy and Paroissien may not have anticipated this consequence. From their vantage point in Australia, resurgent Maori culture and a dynamic cross-cultural interchange were positively compelling (leading Murphy to maintain that New Zealand would become the ‘most interesting Polynesian society in the world’);¹⁰ they thought the country could handle its cultural differences, indeed that its art scene was galvanised by them. But locals did not have the same distance or composure to objectively review and accept their situation; inadvertently, the exhibition struck a nerve.

The sharpness of the attacks on Panoho was underpinned by a wider and more insidious disparagement of the curators for showing respect to the Maori artists in the exhibition whilst supposedly demeaning their Pakeha peers. Looking back, the level of hurt felt by several commentators suggests not necessarily an actual slight, but rather the complexity and intensity of the clash between the deconstructive and reconstructive forces

Colin McCahon,
I Am, 1954, oil on
canvas, 36 × 55cm,
Hocken Pictorial
Collections, Charles
Brasch Bequest 1973,
University of Otago
Library. Courtesy
Hocken Collections
Uare Taoka o Hakena,
reproduced with
permission of Colin
McCahon Research
and Publication Trust

10 B. Murphy, quoted in *ibid.*, p.58.



Michael Parekowhai, *The Indefinite Article*, 1990, wood and acrylic, 248.9 × 609.6 × 35.6cm, collection of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki and Chartwell Gift Collection, purchased with generous assistance from Jim Barr and Mary Barr, 2009. Courtesy Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, reproduced with permission of the artist

in play. Postmodern cynicism and postcolonial affirmation generated a veritable crisis for the cultural establishment. Though the greatest outrage came from a small camp of Pakeha artists, academics, curators and collectors, and it circulated not in published form but by fax machine and word of mouth, it had the dire effect of souring the show's reception at home, leading, in the minds of many, to the reduction of the New Zealand tour to a truncated eight-week presentation at the newly named Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa in Wellington.

While the show was institutionally quashed, the debates it generated flourished. Indeed, the legacy of 'Headlands' lived on for the rest of the decade. Interestingly, this played out in artistic as well as critical circles. Richard Killeen, who wrote a letter of protest to the organisers over the hurt caused by their treatment of Gordon Walters, immediately produced a large body of drawings working through his anger by recycling and adjusting text fragments from the catalogue and assigning the works titles such as *Lest We Forget*

Headlands, *Hatelands* and *Headstones* to underline his sense that the show denigrated its subjects.¹¹ Within months of the exhibition's closing in Sydney, the popular Pakeha artist Dick Frizzell staged a show of his work at his Auckland dealer's gallery that seemed cynically designed to capitalise on the ferment fueled by 'Headlands'. He presented an eclectic line-up of canvases that rendered the tiki motif – especially sacred to Māori – in a range of irreverent pastiches of European high art

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and popular styles (*Tiki*, 1992) accompanied by a catalogue containing essays defending his strategy. Two years after the exhibition, in 1994, Michael Parekowhai's solo touring exhibition 'Kiss the Baby Goodbye', which was co-curated by Robert Leonard and Lara Strongman, featured a large three-dimensional version of a Walters painting that

11 These works, more than 120 in total, have never been exhibited but were circulated in reproduction at the time. Examples can be viewed on the artist's website, at <http://www.richardkilleen.com/work%20on%20paper/1992/1992%20page.html> (last accessed on 28 March 2015).

monumentalised the Pakeha artist's use of the koru form and endeavoured to draw the discussion to a close by adding an additional circle to the composition as a definitive 'full stop'. But the stakes of the 'appropriation debate' were not so easy to quell, and the argument continued to surface in the work of artists like Shane Cotton, Peter Robinson, Marie Shannon, Wayne Youle and even jeweller Warwick Freeman, and in critical essays anatomising and arguing for and against intercultural borrowing by a range of voices, from activist Maori film-maker Merata Mita to Pakeha scholars such as Robin Craw, Francis Pound and Nicholas Thomas.¹²

'Headlands' had a profound impact on New Zealand art and discourse, yet much of the heat it generated has now dissipated. Leonard, who was at the centre of the furore and whose subsequent career was in part shaped by the positions he staked out in the exhibition, has recently revisited this moment with 'nostalgia' for the intensity of the debates, which he believes derived from the 'intimacy' of the New Zealand scene — a situation that has since shifted as New Zealand embraces the 'global turn' and as concern for national self-definition evaporates.¹³ Equally importantly, 'Headlands', along with those other components of the MCA's initial programming, staked out a position for its Australian host. By being open to incommensurability and difference and by recognising the lessons a near neighbour could offer because of shared and singular histories, the MCA was able to escape what Murphy called the 'hall of mirrors' that is the fate of the contemporary art museum under the conditions of global capitalism. Now, as the art world grapples with or succumbs to the levelling effects of globalisation, and as the contemporary art industry continues to churn, the promise that the MCA's inaugural international programme offered — to cast the institution as a thought-provoking platform for post-national, postcolonial and regionalist positions — seems a distant memory. Critical localism has given way to celebratory globalism, in which difference and particularity serve as selling points rather than opportunities for self-reflection.

12 See Merata Mita, 'Trick or Treat: Issues of Feminism and Postcolonialism in Relation to the Arts', *Te Pua*, vol.3, no.1, 1994, pp.37–41; Robin Craw, 'Anthropophagy of the Other: The Problematic of Biculturalism and the Art of Appropriation', *Art & Asia Pacific*, 1993, pp.86–91; Francis Pound, *The Space Between: Pākehā Use of Māori Motifs in Modernist New Zealand Art*, Auckland: Workshop Press, 1994; and Nicholas Thomas, 'Kiss the Baby Goodbye: Kōwhiriwhai and Aesthetics in New Zealand', *Critical Inquiry*, vol.22, no.1, 1995, pp.90–121.

13 See Robert Leonard, *Nostalgia for Intimacy: Gordon H. Brown Annual Art History Lecture 10*, Wellington: Victoria University of Wellington, 2012.