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Visual Artists Against Nuclear Arms



A Pacific Phoenix

The VAANA Peace Mural

RIEMKE ENSING

In 1986, in this magazine, I wrote extensively, with almost unreserved enthusiasm, about what has now become Stage 1—the first eight panels—of New Zealand's only 'Peace Wall'—the VAANA mural—on the corner of Karangahape and Ponsonby Roads, Auckland.¹

Initiated by Margaret Lawlor-Bartlett and supported by Marte Szirmay and Nigel Brown, a first call-up for artists to attend a meeting to formulate ideas and strategies to create awareness about the nuclear peril and work to immobilize nuclear arms proliferation, resulted in a large and enthusiastic gathering of arts related people determined for a better world.

Twenty-four years have since passed. Both the world and the wall have changed considerably and it's time to look back and catch up.

In 1985, the VAANA (Visual Artists against Nuclear Arms) mural paintings seemed dramatic, vivid and, for the most part, unequivocal in their protest messages against the nuclear threat. 'NO NUCLEAR FIRE FOR AMBER' (Pat Hanly), 'NUCLEAR FREE AOTEAROA' (Margaret Lawlor-Bartlett), 'LET THE WORLD BE/NUCLEAR FREE' (Claudia Pond-Eyley), 'NO NUKES IS GOOD NUKES' (Vanya Lowry). John Nicol and Nigel Brown respectively expressed their concern for 'A LIVING EARTH', 'A GENTLE EARTH'. Only John Eaden and Jill Carter-Hansen chose not to use an explicitly stated verbal message, although both works could be read as symbolic and connotative visual statements that suggest both menace and foreboding.

What strikes me now as most significant is that these initial eight panels, all painted within the confines of the gallery space of Outreach (now Artstation) during a period of three weeks, have

a unity, a vibrancy and a utterly coherent sense of dedication and commitment that holds that whole part of the mural together as a cohesive anti-nuclear / peace statement in a way that the rest of the mural doesn't seem to me to ever again achieve.

There's a strong sense here, at this stage, of people working together rather than separately and alone—of people united in a common goal, resolutely determined to make a difference and, as a community of artists, broadcast a clear and unambiguous message to help save the world from the ever present possibility of nuclear annihilation.

1986—The International Year of Peace—saw the erection of a further set of panels. These included works by Miriam Cameron, Richard and Marie Collins (McMahon) Kate Millington, Claire Mortimer, Maria Rodgers and Delwyn Williams. This stage of the project is interesting also for what no longer survives and what has been added and changed. Over the years various forms of damage, vandalism and graffiti led to the idea of new work for this particular section of the wall and in 1993 a competition saw the work of Jim Viviani and Lydia Pond-Eyley added to the existing work. By 2004 the mural was beginning to disintegrate and New Zealand's anti-nuclear stance was under attack by Don Brash wishing it to 'be gone by lunch-time'.

The idea of a 'necessary, strong, re-invigorating Peace initiative, with younger artists making eight new panels'² was considered by Margaret Lawlor-Bartlett.

After considerable consultation (the history of this stage of the mural is too complicated and protracted an area to cover in this article) it was decided to approach Nora West of the Karangahape Road Business Association to become Project Manager and in May 2005 Lawlor-Bartlett proposed digitally reproducing the mural using Claudia Pond-Eyley's and possibly Gil Hanly's original photos.

On December 23, 2005, the 20 panels of the original mural were pulled down. The fragments were auctioned on-line with the proceeds going to the Peace Foundation.

In January 2006 the digital reproduction of the first stage of the mural was unveiled and in February 2006 VAANA representative John Nicoll selected six new works for Stage 2. These consisted of works by Miriam Cameron, Kate Millington, students from Marte Szirmay's Auckland Girls Grammar School Art Department Maori Unit, students from the Media Design School, Jonny Wartmann of Disruptive and New Zealand born Samoan artist Andy Leleisi'uao. The works were exhibited at Disrupt Gallery on K'Rd between August and September of that year and the digitalization blessed and unveiled on Saturday 7 October 2006.

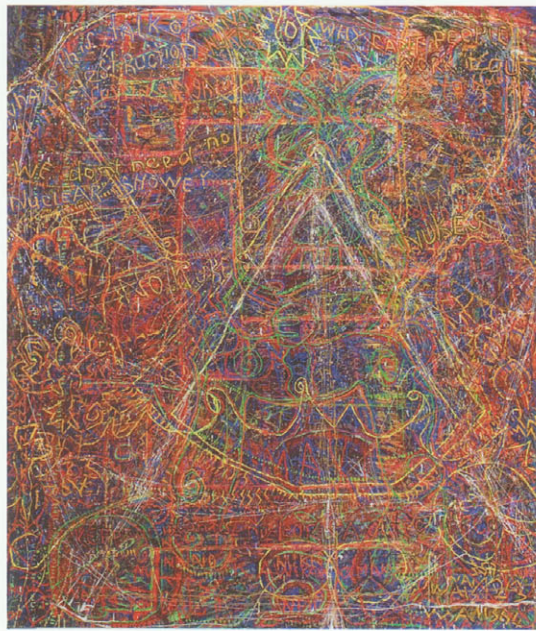
Miriam Cameron's initial painting, *Pacific Waka* ('we're all in the same boat') has, in this restructuring process, been replaced by *The Oarsman*, which continues the idea of the struggle, the vigour of co-operation, the need to work together in unison and harmony in the storm that adversity brings. The 'waka' in these works are themselves imperiled by the surrounding seas but are very different, more organic vessels than the menacing nuclear powered and armed ships that bring their terror and potential destructiveness.

'I wanted to show that human dignity has survived and evolved for thousands of years in an ocean of nearly one-third of the world's water, before the power perverters decided to pollute it with nuclear tests' (Miriam Cameron)³

One of the works from this second stage of the mural that didn't make it to the 'rebirth' in its present digitalized form was Marie (McMahon) Collins' *White Horse*. This may not have been a superb painting in itself, but I remember being quite bowled over by its difference. It seemed to have about it an aloofness, an 'other worldliness' that set it apart from its frequently more strident neighbours. It suggested a more ancient and chivalric world and reminded of those prehistoric cave paintings. The image also brought to mind that famous white horse dug into the chalk hills of Berkshire to commemorate a great victory over a dominant power. Although 'faye' and therefore—like the horses in fairy tales that speak with human voices—prophetic and able to provide advice, this horse, by its very paleness, managed at the same time that it evoked the magical, to give one the glimpse of the present peril and the potential apocalypse. 'Behold, a pale horse...' Revelations vi, 8.

The painting's caption, 'NOTHING IS SEPARATE' evoked E. M. Forster's 'only connect' which, while suggesting the positive imperative for making connection, also implies despair at the difficulty and the tensions between the ideological and the often hostile world.

When Ron Brownson spoke on behalf of absent artists at the John Leech Gallery (10 March, 2009) he spoke of this very connectedness in a little anecdote



about his father retuning to New Zealand as a J Force veteran from Hiroshima where, at the very epicentre of the atomic bomb's explosion, he had casually picked up and brought home pieces of fused glass that must have been irradiated as he himself no doubt was. Brownson's point was that he too, as offspring, would have 'some of that molecular frisson' within him. As Marie Collins pointed out in her painting, 'Nothing is Separate'. We are all part of war. War is always on the doorstep.⁴

Marie Collins died a few weeks before the panels, at this stage badly damaged and graffitied, were pulled down. No suitable photograph was apparently available to allow this work to be digitalized and so we have lost an unusual and thought-provoking image in the battle of saints slaying the dragon.

Since those early days of Outreach and Disrupt Galleries, the mural has gained kudos and mana. It has become respectable. This brings into question the point and function of a mural which by its very nature we constantly expect to be defaced, graffitied and painted over with new messages, although the standard of graffiti these days seems so uninterestingly uniform and illiterate in its approach, that that notion might well belong in the realms of a past where such 'art' was very much part of the public consciousness.

Stage 3 of the mural was 'unveiled' and blessed at the Karangahape Road site on the afternoon of March 3, 2009. Auckland Mayor John Banks, who received the 'Deed of Gift' of the entire mural signed by the 22 artists, spoke of his admiration for the artists, who despite being ridiculed and derided by public bodies in the past (himself included) had persevered with

(opposite) The VAANA Peace Mural 2009 showing works by (left to right) Julian Hooper, John Reynolds and Alexis Hunter

(above) EMILY KARAKA *No Nukes* 2008
Oil on canvas, 2130 x 1800 mm.



their stand against nuclear war and proliferation. They had been proved right and their work was now not only appreciated but a considerable contribution to the city.

Dame Cath Tizard, who had herself been Mayor during the protests against American nuclear ships entering Auckland harbour, spoke of the wall as a 'wonderful celebration of belief' and suggested that 'if there is an iconic statement in Auckland, this is it.'

In the evening of that same day, John Leech Gallery hosted the opening reception at its premises in Kitchener Street. Speakers included Professor Elizabeth Rankin and Chris Saines, who accepted the VAANA Mural Digital Files on behalf of the Auckland City Art Gallery.

On display (and for sale to raise funds for the cost of VAANA mural project) were the eight new original works now also digitalized and enlarged and added to the huge wall of images stretching something like 55-60 metres as a continuing statement for Peace on the original Karangahape Road site.

This was a fascinating exhibition, not least because

the works on show were so very different from what one might have expected. The original Stage 1 artists had had no 'brief' as such but were, as a direct result of the immediate political situation, united in their anti-nuclear stance. For the 2006 Stage 2 of the mural, the 'brief' had simply been to 'respond to the theme of Peace and Social Justice'.

For this most recent continuation of the wall, the brief suggested the 'central theme of PEACE and what it means to you.' This of course was an almost unrestricted opportunity to respond in whichever direction the imagination might lead and the result was unexpected, provocative and challenging.

Of the eight paintings, Julian Hooper's has to be the most intriguing. In an artist's talk he explained that he uses his family as subject matter rather than respond explicitly and literally to a 'message'. The work in question for the mural is entitled *A Family Portrait*.

The concept of 'peace' and 'family' together, may, for many, evoke ambivalent reactions given the frequently dysfunctional and violent nature of such groupings. This particular 'portrait' is the more engaging, as the 'family' in question is a nautical one of marine creatures, rather than the human species. This is indeed a celebration of *la difference* and recalls Hooper's apparently idyllic life as a small child on the edge of a lagoon on the island of Tokelau where he would spend endless hours peering into the depths of the sea teaming with strange and marvelous creatures, and where, as a painter, his imagery was formed. Even the eyes of the little stingray-like creature on the top left of the painting are not unlike those of his small son, he informs us.

There is apparently no question here of any oblique 'message'. The creatures in the painting are not mutants or mutations as a result of a nuclear explosion. The jellyfish-like shape in the centre of the painting is not the 'mushroom' we might expect in a 'protest' painting and the painter himself and his wife Christine are benignly relaxed and peaceful creatures in their mesmerizing environment. Of course the somewhat garish orange and yellow stripes radiating all around and seeming to rise from the inner depths of the painting, almost seeming to encompass and even overwhelm us, may suggest a more terrifying reading, but by the same token, the small sea-horse-like creatures at the bottom of the painting might reference the 'radical and mysterious' AD1968 painting by Rita Angus which purports to be—'a record of her declaration against war and the incorporation of a new language of symbols.'⁵

Brought up in the Waitakeres and taught by Colin



(above) SERAPHINE PICK *Limen* 2008
Oil on linen, 1010 x 1010 mm.

(left) CHARLOTTE GRAHAM *Ko te Tuatoru* 2009
Oil bitumen on canvas, 1010 x 1010 mm.

(opposite above) JULIAN HOOPER *A Family Portrait* 2008
Acrylic on linen, 1320 x 1370 mm.

(opposite below) DICK FRIZZELL *Good News* 2008
Oil & enamel on linen, 1500 x 1500 mm.

McCahon, Alexis Hunter was introduced at an early age to animism and anthropology. As a consequence she draws heavily on the spiritual relationship to landscape and the role of the artist to make a contribution to society. Tending to work in series she may be triggered by a 'news' image flitting across the screen, or a geological picture of the earth's crust in an old encyclopedia. Her *Revenge of the Gaia* is influenced by the work of scientist and environmentalist James Lovelock. In a book of that title, he suggests that the earth, its natural systems and the species that inhabit it, is a single organism. The living system works in equilibrium, and balance is constantly adjusted and restored.

Lovelock's message is unequivocal. If humanity acts to derail the system, the earth will re-adjust with disastrous consequences. In this scenario, global heating is set to take its course. We are the cause of it. The shift is already visible in the melting of Antarctic ice and rising sea levels. Ambiguously and certainly ambivalently in terms of this painting within the construct of an anti-nuclear mural, Lovelock takes a pro-nuclear power stance and so might add an ironic, certainly a more disturbing touch, to our interpretation of this particular painting.

In all, Hunter produced seven paintings to get this one image for the mural. One of these, *The Revenge of the Gaia 4* (held at John Leech Gallery) triggered by the bombing of Gaza, is a stunning abstraction in luminous reds, whereas the chosen painting for the mural works primarily in varying shades of blue, with the earth's volcanic red poignantly fissuring and fuming through the dark blue hills of the evocatively abstracted landscape. Although suggestive of the ominous potential that rising carbon dioxide levels might tip the earth's balance and cause irreversible and catastrophic changes in the climate, Hunter insists that the work is 'intuitive and echoes the memory of the Waitakeres at dusk.'⁶

Emily Karaka's passionate protest paintings about Treaty issues and land rights have made considerable impact on our consciousness. In 1987 she was named one of a cell of Maori terrorists by the then Hobson Opposition MP Ross Meurant, who himself had been somewhat of a 'terrorist' as second-in-command of the infamous 1981 police anti-riot Red Squad. Karaka replied to the charge with the typical fierceness also displayed in her work. 'I am armed with a paintbrush. If that is regarded as terrorism, then I am a terrorist. My artwork is my platform. My brush is my patu.'⁷

Karaka's work for the mural is a volatile mix of colour and text. Densely packed, the fragmented texts look as though they have exploded out of an eruption. The influence of Philip Clairmont and Alan Maddox is clear and one suspects the presence of Jackson Pollock in Karaka's seemingly frenetic, but obviously carefully controlled canvasses. From a distance they appear a mass of furious colour but come up close and realize the detail that will keep one engaged.

In this particular work, entitled *No Nukes* Karaka has gone to considerable length to make pertinent



connections to the first stage of the mural.

Between 1985-86 VAANA participated in a peace video for *Kaleidoscope*. The reggae group Herbs, founded by Karaka's brother Dilworth, took part. The band and its 1980 protest hit single 'French Letter' (which spent 11 weeks on the charts) came to express the country's anti-nuclear stance. The song was re-recorded to garner support for the prevention of further nuclear testing at Mururoa. Similarly, 'No Nukes—The Second Letter to France', 'Nuclear Waste' and 'Light of the Pacific' were, and continue to be important popular statements against the madness of nuclear power.

Karaka has used fragments from these songs to scatter across the canvas. As a result, her message, presented almost subliminally as fractured fragments in the intensity of the heat of colour, make that message, when you seek it out—as if fossicking for meaning in the disintegrated aftermath of some

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earth-shaking event—all the more meaningful and expressive.

Emily Karaka's niece Charlotte Graham is also concerned with Treaty issues. Her work, oil bitumen on canvas entitled *Ko te Tuatoru* (Article Three) was quick to sell. The pitch-black gloss of the background gave a gorgeous shine to the Maori text of the Article, which by delightful quirks and imaginative spacing and imaging of some of the words, gave the sense of an illuminated manuscript.

This slight sense of 'other worldliness' was also part of Seraphine Pick's response entitled *Limen* (Threshold) although the image of the woman sprouting a tree to shade her in a seemingly arid landscape is certainly peaceful and evokes a strong sense of the possibilities of rebirth and regeneration. This work too sold instantly.

That leaves three works, which by their very simplicity and explicitly stated textual messages are essentially self-explanatory. Like Seraphine Pick's work, Dick Frizzell's 'Good News' seems to suggest an ecological concern although there is a possible undercurrent of irony as the Coldplay lyric 'We live in a beautiful world' is part of the 'Don't Panic' series and preceded by the lines 'all of us are done for'. There's the same kind of wicked tongue-in-cheek raising the eyebrow humour in John Pule's *Everything will be alright*. We try to reassure ourselves but in our hearts we know that we're dysfunctional and disconnected as the bleeding, clapped-out image suggests. To merely 'think peace' as the healthy, regenerative tree-as-heart squiggle at the bottom of the painting tells us, won't be enough.

And that leaves us with John Reynolds' *War*—what is it good for? The answer to that as the Motown/Edwin Starr protest song clearly enunciated, is 'Absolutely nothing'. Of course that would be facile. The fact that wars persist with such alacrity is that they're extremely lucrative for some. But the artists and the songwriters can't afford to lose heart and must continue in their affirmation for PEACE!

Note: Although the actual exhibition has been pulled down, the unsold works are still available to be viewed at the John Leech Gallery. Part of the proceeds of the sales will go towards the considerable cost of the VAANA mural, which has heroically been underwritten by Margaret Lawlor-Bartlett in her indomitable determination to see the Peace Wall completed to its present stage. Your support in this respect will be invaluable.

1. Riemke Ensing, 'Paintings for Peace', *Art New Zealand* 39, Winter 1986, pp. 29-31.
2. Margaret Lawlor-Bartlett, *A History of Visual Artists against Nuclear Arms (VAANA)*, July 2007, ongoing, unpublished.
3. I am indebted to Miriam Cameron for her telephone conversations and e-mail correspondence about aspects of the mural and her particular works.
4. Notes taken from Ron Brownson's talk, John Leech Gallery, 10 March 2009

5. Rita Angus: *An Artist's Life*, Jill Trevelyan, Te Papa Press, 2008, pp 329-331.

6. Alexis Hunter, *Paintings of the Landscape*—artist's statement, (e-mailed)

7. Witi Ihimaera, 'Karaka', *Art New Zealand* 60, Spring 1991, p.80.

Kowhaiwhai Dreaming

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4. Madhu Suri Prakash, 1999, 'Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Ecological Literacy Through Initiation into People's Science', in Semali I. M. & Kincheloe J. I. (eds.), *What is Indigenous Knowledge? Voices from the Academy, Indigenous Knowledge and Schooling Series*, Falmer Press, New York, 1996.

5. In 2007, the *Haeata* exhibition relied on single vibrant colours such as blue-based reds, bright yellows, hyped blues and verdant greens on custom board. They are conceptual pieces based on the transitional and illuminating space of the dawn that breaks against land.

6. These discrete devices were evident in the Nga kaawai o te koopuu series, from *Apiti* exhibition, 11 August – 3 September 2005, Tinakori Gallery (now Page Blackie Gallery), Wellington.

7. Roger Neich, *Painted Histories: Early Maori Figurative Painting*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, pp. 204-206.

8. Pitau a manaia is a regionally specific kowhaiwhai pattern to hapu of Rongowhakaata, Poverty Bay, East Coast. It is a complex figurative form well known in Te Hau ki Turanga, the whare wananga meeting house from 1842. This house is currently in Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, who well recognise that the house belongs to the tribe due to historic and unjust confiscation in 1865. The main design conventions that Taepa uses are Manawa, Pitau (fern frond), Koru (form folding in on itself), Kape (eyebrow form) and rauru (spiral). Kape rua is a design that extends from the kape convention.

9. Huhana Smith, 2007, *Taiawhio II Contemporary Maori Artists: 18 New Conversations*, Te Papa Press: Wellington, p. 239.

10. Charles Te Ahukaramu Royal, 2004, *Matauranga Maori and Museum Practice, A Discussion paper*, prepared for the Museum of New Zealand Papa Tongarewa, p. 66.

11. Derived from edited text that was originally written by the senior curator Matauranga Maori for the international Maori touring exhibition, *E Tu Ake: Standing Strong* that will tour overseas in 2011.

12. Ngatai Taepa's *Manawarangi* exhibition took place at Page Blackie Gallery from November 11- December 6, 2008.

13. Sandy Adsett (Ngati Pahauwera, Ngati Kahungunu) is a significant contemporary Maori artist, expert in kowhaiwhai and leading art educator. He was one of the Gordon Tovey generation of teachers who used Maori customary visual culture in art education for schools in the 1950s and 1960s.

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