



Drawing Continuity

James Ormsby's Survey at Pataka

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Drawing and mark-making is the visual language of communication from which most art forms derive. It is the foundation that one is introduced to in one's formative years at art school. For artist James Ormsby, of Ngati Maniapoto, Ngati Pikiao and Scottish descent, drawing and mark-making represent a lifelong interest and passion that have shaped his career. This was recently reiterated last October with a survey of his drawings presented at Pataka Art + Museum in Porirua.

Whakapapa, curated by Mark Hutchins-Pond, presented 13 of Ormsby's most significant works from 2005 to 2016. The term whakapapa is most commonly associated with genealogy and descent but can also be interpreted as the process of layering and the building of continuity. It is a fitting metaphor that not only tracks the growth of the artist, but also provides a way of navigating the philosophical ponderings and interwoven histories presented in his art. Genealogy, philosophy and the power of sign and symbol are the recurring themes that always seem to find new voice in Ormsby's practice. However, perhaps the most notable aspect is just the sheer joy and passion for drawing expressed through the work.

In 2006 the artist chose to tackle drawing at a scale not previously explored and this opened up a new chapter for him. He executed a series of large-scale drawings on paper which have become known today as his signature works. Works such as his 2010 *Genesis (Proto-Psalterion V)*, at a daunting five metres in length, present prophetic statements to be navigated. When viewing these works side by side they are a commanding proposition. Framed by the black walls of the gallery space at Pataka, they are authoritative and compelling, if not a little intimidating. Intriguingly, this factor also sets up a slightly odd tension when contrasted with the intricate and fragile interior worlds of the drawings themselves. However, once in front of each work they present like window-views into a separate yet connected set of ideas.

I draw to understand things. Most of my large drawings end up being a complex diagram. They are a kind of indigenous cartography. They chart or map a mixed outlook on life: its natural ecology and human history, its stories...

One of the most provocative and iconic images in this survey is *Tawhiao Cartoon (Large Drawing #22)* (2008). This impressive portrait of the second Maori king, Tawhiao, is as mesmerising today as it was when first exhibited. It presents a profile of King Tawhiao rendered meticulously in graphite with a crown of what seems to resemble nautical stars

hovering above his head. His shoulders morph into the mountain range that meets a landscape comprised of detailed cross hatching that echoes the Waikato tukutuka pattern *naho tariwha* (the teeth of the tariwha). They form linear threads suggestive of a fine woven korowai (cloak), possibly a nod to one of Ormsby's drawing mentors, the late John Bevan Ford. Meanwhile a swirled and smeared moody skyscape sits beyond the horizon. The stars can be read as a reference to Te Pahi o Matariki—the coat of arms emblem designed by Tīwai Parāone for the Maori King movement in the late nineteenth century. However, it could also reference the Christian faith that Tawhiao embraced.

Incorporating such a prominent image might be viewed by some as culturally bold if not risky. However, the artist is also recalling a direct whakapapa connection through his grandmother to the great rangatira and the process of rendering the image is an assertion of that connection.

King Tawhiao (c.1825–94) was regarded as a visionary who bequeathed wisdom in the form of prescient, philosophical and ideological sayings, which continue to be followed by his Waikato iwi today.¹ Ormsby's work represents Tawhiao as both ancestor and cultural mediator who presided in a precarious time of colonial change. Tawhiao's prophetic teachings, his embracing of the Christian faith and pacifist nature, apparent in his renunciation of warfare between Maori and Pakeha with peaceful actions, offer a platform and position for the artist. Tawhiao appears numerous times throughout this body of work including the 2007 *Waiata (Large Drawing #17)* and the 2015 *Rei Tawhiao en route*, depicted in graphite, kokowai (red ochre pigment) and wax. Tawhiao is the kaitiaki or guardian figure for the artist and his investigations.

Ormsby is also a mediator, moving between symbolism, philosophy and cultural metaphor to speak to many audiences, offering both Maori and Pakeha frames of reference. The woven lines within his work refer to all 'immigrant family lines... be they colonising Maori, Pakeha or American'.² Ormsby navigates individual and collective cultural identity to imbue personal meaning and to find a position that is uniquely his own. Here the viewer is afforded more than one reading of history with numerous entry points.

Similarly, his research has strived to look beyond the familiar to present new ways of appreciating and approaching matauranga Maori (Maori knowledge) and Maori visual culture. In this regard he has suspended the reliance on particular motifs such

¹Opposite
JAMES ORMSBY *Tawhiao Cartoon (Large Drawing #22)* 2008
Graphite on paper, 2400 x 1800 mm.
(Private collection, Auckland)

James Ormsby: Whakapapa, Pataka Art + Museum, Porirua
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Curated by Mark Hutchins-Pond



as *kowhaiwhai* patterning and other recognisable Maori symbolism to explore new ways to imbue and interpret cultural meaning. Ormsby lived most of his young life in Melbourne before returning to Aotearoa New Zealand in 1995 to assist the late Buck Nini in establishing the Maori visual arts programme for Te Wānanga o Aotearoa in Te Awamutu.⁴ Having taught Maori visual arts here for over 20 years—where one would assume the fundamentals of Maori art and design would include *kowhaiwhai*—this stance might seem incongruent with these very teachings. However, James Ormsby is interested in looking beyond the conventional and asking us to challenge and question our own preconceived ideas of cultural practice. It is a philosophy that occurs continually throughout his research and his thinking.

Genesis (Proto-Psalter V) (2010) is the artist's tour de force and this exhibition's centrepiece. It is a majestic work that reflects on his European heritage. It draws on Ormsby's Maori *whakapapa* knowledge alongside the Ormsby Psalter—a medieval book of psalms that resides in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, England. Here it was gifted by a thirteenth-century monk named Robert Ormsby.⁵ Ormsby's five-metre-long work on paper presents passages in text from English and Maori translations of the Bible. These have replaced the linear *aho* lines found in previous

works and we now see coded passages scripted in ink jet forming layers of descending script. Interspersed is an array of icons. We see the cross motif, the *waka* form encircled by navigational stars and at the far end the letters *IO* or *Iu Matua Kōi* the name of the Maori supreme being. *IO* represents a pre-Christian Maori understanding of a supreme being.⁶ Above this we see Tashiao's image appear again, this time dotted in a lunar calendar structure as a measure of time and space. In many respects it is a baffling work to unravel. It is intense, filled with personal conviction and esoteric declarations.

The 2008 *Pacific (Large Drawing #20)* charts Pacific narrative, with its colonial story and cautious statement about our collective future. This drawing is anchored by a carved ancestral female figure from the seminal meeting house *Te Hui ō Taranga*. In Ormsby's work this figure represents Papatuanuku (the earth mother). She sits just under the land with her piercing gaze hauntingly present. Layered above we find landscapes and seascapes turned upside down. Here a *waka* lies beached on landscape tides, stranded and isolated in barren fields of contemplation. Above from it a Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) bucket rides the waves of consumer culture and multinational interests. The KFC bucket emerges out of the ocean like a modern-day torch in the hands of Lady Liberty.



Instead of welcoming new immigrants arriving from abroad, she is perhaps confirming the Pacific region's predicament: caught in the current of consumer culture and corporate agendas. A cautionary tale about the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement perhaps? Or are we already there? Nonetheless it is another instance of Ormsby playing mediator.

Drawing is the primarily linear rendition of objects in the visible world, as well as of concepts, thoughts, attitudes, emotions, and fantasies given visual form, of symbols and even of abstract forms.⁷ James Ormsby's drawing practice explores many of these qualities. His meticulously patient work and masterful command of drawing knowledge and technique is undeniable. It is showcased in *Whakapapa*. The artist's intuitive ability to turn right when you think he is going left is reflected in his eclectic visual vocabulary. Ormsby seems most comfortable when he is creating his own philosophical landscapes within which to position himself. Perhaps that is the quest of all artists and of art-making?—in understanding one's own cultural truth and being comfortable within it. *Whakapapa*

charts this journey and expresses the many layers that make its complex yet unique weave. The exhibition is like a *wharehau* (meeting house) where his articulated drawings are the *poupou* (carved ancestral figures) that adorn the walls. They interweave the artist's expression of *whakapapa* and, like the *wharehau*, Ormsby's drawing and research connect him to a wider history and cultural heritage that builds on this continuity.

1. James Ormsby, 'Large drawings', retrieved from <http://www.jamesormsby.com/largedrawings.htm>, 11 February 2017.
2. Zena Stanhope & Ngahinaka Mason (eds), *Godfred Lindauer's New Zealand: The Maori Portraits*, Auckland University Press, Auckland 2016, p. 100.
3. James Ormsby, *op. cit.*
4. Adam Clifford, 'Outsider joins the holding staff', *New Zealand Herald*, 7 July 2007, Section 2, p. 4.
5. Ebbie Woodward, James Ormsby: *Whakapapa*, exhibition catalogue, Pataka Art + Museum, Porirua 2016, unpaginated.
6. James Cox, *The Invention of God in Indigenous Societies*, Routledge, Abingdon & New York 2014, pp. 35–66. Here Cox argues that this 'pre-Christian' understanding of a supreme god may in fact be due to the earlier Māori missionary activities.
7. Herbert R. Hutter, 'Drawing: Art', retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/art/drawing-art>, 11 February 2017.

(opposite above)
James Ormsby's *Whakapapa* at Pataka Art + Museum, Porirua, October 2016
(Photograph: Mark Taitavani)

(opposite below)
JAMES ORMSBY *Genesis* (PPV) 2011
Graphite, pigment ink, polychromatic pencil & gold leaf on paper,
150 x 8100 mm,
(Collection James Wallace Arts Trust)

(right) JAMES ORMSBY
Ein Dschinn im Saeg 2015
Charcoal, graphite, pigment &
wax on paper, 350 x 420 mm,
(Private collection, Rodney)

