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**Māori Curatorship**  
**at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki 1998-2001**

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

In

Museum Studies

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## Abstract

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This thesis documents the experience of Ngāhiraka Mason, the first appointee to the Māori curatorial position at the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. It examines the development of her curatorial practice with specific focus on contemporary Māori art. The purpose of the thesis is to describe the conditions and relationships which influence Ngāhiraka's practice as a Māori curator.

The thesis identifies the Māori curatorial position as an important development in the Gallery's relationship with Māori. In order to understand its significance, a history of Māori representation at the Gallery is constructed. Based on acquisition, exhibition and archival data, recurring patterns of racial prejudice and discrimination against Māori are revealed. The thesis then investigates the events which gave rise to the position in order to understand the Gallery's motives and present the complex environment in which the Māori curator practises.

Ngāhiraka's personal narrative is at the heart of the thesis, a narrative that chronicles the cultural and educational experiences that brought her to the Gallery. Ngāhiraka then describes the conditions and expectations she encountered and the conflict between Curator and Kaitiaki as models of practice. The development of her first Māori art exhibition *Pūrangiaho: Seeing Clearly* (2001) is analysed to provide evidence of her agency within the site. The exhibition is then deconstructed as an expression of Māori identity and its impact is evaluated from several perspectives.

The thesis contends that the Gallery exerts a level of influence that compromises Ngāhiraka's ability to effectively represent Māori. It is argued that the art museum is threatened by the practice of Māori values. The Māori curator then, carries a different kaupapa (framework) which inevitably challenges the balance of power at the Gallery. There is however, a level of intransigence in the art museum that cannot be affected by the incursions of a single Māori employee. The thesis concludes that Ngāhiraka's practice primarily advantages the Gallery and is of limited benefit to Māori. Despite this, Ngāhiraka takes what opportunity is afforded to her and issues a wero (challenge) to contemporary Māori artists. She postulates a new criterion upon which they should be judged which involves making a positive contribution to the viability of Māori at a social level. In doing so, Ngāhiraka engages her practice with Māori-self-determination and becomes an activist against institutional racism.

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## Readers' guide to the thesis

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This project complies with the Massey University Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations involving Human Participants and has been reviewed by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (MUHEC): Palmerston North Protocol 04/59.

Māori terms and concepts have been used extensively in this thesis without italics or translation. A fold-out glossary is provided on page 174 to assist readers.

The use of macrons in referenced material and proper names follows the form of the original at the time of publication.

The Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki has carried several names throughout its history (see Appendix A). When reference has been made to the Gallery within an historic context, the name of the institution during that period is used.

The main research participant, Ngāhiraka Mason is referred to in the text by her Christian name. This follows Māori conventions, primarily the adoption of surnames post-contact.

All images are courtesy of the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki unless stated otherwise.

**Whakarongo mai e te iwi nei  
Whakarongo mai e te motu nei  
Ahakoa whakapiri koe ki a tauīwi  
E kore e taka te ingoa Māori i runga i a koe  
He mangumangu taipō nei hoki tātou pakia!  
Te kupu a Tohu ki ngā iwi e rua  
“E kore e piri te uku ki te rino  
Ka whitingia e te rā ka ngahoro.”**

**Hearken to me, ye tribes  
Hearken to me, ye land  
Whether or not you align yourself with non-Māori  
The name ‘Māori’ will not fall from you  
For we are indeed dark ghost-like creatures!  
Tohu had this to say to the two peoples,  
“Clay will not adhere to iron  
For as soon as the sun shines on it, it will fall.”**

## INTRODUCTION

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The Māori curator represents at any one time; their whanau, hapū and iwi, artists and the curatorial profession while continually “confronting the reality” of the institutions that they work within (Curiger in *Vade Mecum* 2001:48). The nature of the art museum and its collections however, adds another layer of complexity to Māori curatorial practice that has been little recognized in previous surveys of Māori museum workers (O’Regan 1997). The Māori curator in the art museum operates on the periphery of the ancestral Māori world and at the forefront of contemporary Māori culture. Māori curatorship is a political act that defines Māori identity to a global audience yet operates beyond the tribal structures and customary protocols of the culture it represents. This terrain is lonely, difficult and without customary precedent.

This thesis documents the experience of one Māori woman curator and the development of her curatorial practice within the context of a New Zealand art museum. The purpose of the research is to identify the cultural factors which influence the practice of that curator. The research describes the conditions of practice with specific focus on the exhibition of contemporary Māori art. It then evaluates the impact of these conditions on the representation of Māori within the site.

The primary research objective is to examine the nature of Māori curatorship at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. The project constructs a history of Māori representation at the Gallery and examines the development of the Māori curatorial position. The main research participant, Ngāhiraka Mason (Ngāi Tūhoe, Te Arawa, Ngāiterangi) narrates her experience as Assistant Curator, Kaitiaki Māori and describes how she has incorporated Māori values into her curatorial practice. The exhibition development process for the contemporary Māori art exhibition *Pūrangiaho: Seeing Clearly* (2001) is then charted. The exhibition is analysed as evidence of Ngāhiraka’s practice and deconstructed as an expression of Māori identity. The outcomes, successes and limitations of this practice are evaluated and the nature of Māori curatorship within the site is examined.