

Exhibition and Film Review

Diving into the Human Psyche

Inhale/Exhale twin Exhibitions by Vincent Ward held simultaneously at the Gus Fisher Gallery, The University of Auckland and at the TSB Wallace Arts Center, Auckland, July 2012

Rain of the Children. [Film] Directed, Produced and Written by Vincent Ward. (2008). Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand: Vincent Ward Films.

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As I regularly invite my clients to inhale and exhale and connect with their breath, their bodies' sensations, their hearts, and deeper parts of themselves through the expressive arts, I find inspiration and resonance in Vincent Ward's art works. Vincent Ward (b.1956) is one of the most original and acclaimed New Zealand artists, and some have called him a visionary. His latest exhibitions, *Inhale/Exhale* were held simultaneously at the Gus Fisher Gallery, in the University of Auckland and the Wallace Arts Centre at the Pah Homestead in July 2012. *Inhale* was a cinematic installation while *Exhale* showcased painting and photographic print. I visited both exhibitions and attended some of the talks.

As an expressive arts therapist I am fascinated by his work: the depth of emotions he conveys through these multimedia exhibitions, and, more broadly his quest into the human psyche as demonstrated throughout his work in film, which includes: *In Spring One Plants Alone* (1981), *Vigil* (1984), *The Navigator* (1988), *Map of the Human Heart* (1993), *What Dreams may Come* (1998), *River Queen* (2005) and his latest: *Rain of the Children* (2008). There is beauty and poetry in his use of images to define a moment, a relationship, a tension, and in his exploration of transformation, and vulnerability. As are expressive arts therapists, Vincent Ward is also interested in the space between the viewer and the artwork. This is the way he concluded his talk at the Wallace Arts Centre, leaving us with our emotions, feelings, and own sensitivity and thoughts to experience his work. His artistic expression of the themes vulnerability and transformative moments gives shape and form to feelings I sometimes experience in the therapy room as I listen to my clients struggle or I as witness their art work. From his tall paintings wounded bodies of light emerge from darkness often in precarious situation: floating, flying, falling, sinking, crashing.

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Ward is inviting us into his own psyche: “When I was 13, I almost drowned” was one of the titles in the cinematic installation. There we were confronted in one room with many screens of a naked woman encapsulated in a giant transparent membrane floating inside blue green waters, with fishes swimming around. These images evokes drowning, birth, struggle, isolation, evolution and transformation. Another small room had four screens facing each other; flapping white wings in the night, a white horse walking in dark waters, a woman face in and out of water and a phoenix flying across a painting created with his very personal technique called motion painting (first used in his film: *What Dreams may Come*). These are common images and motifs in Ward’s films (Read, 2012). The room evokes spirits, renaissance, the transformation and the cycle of death and rebirth: “All my work is about the human psyche, I am interested in human transformation and exploring multiple time frames” said Ward (2012).



His films are informed by his own experience: his questioning, beliefs, struggle, wonders, childhood’s memories, as well as New Zealand historical and cultural context: *In Spring One Plants Alone* (1981), *Vigil* (1984), *River Queen* (2005), *Rain of the Children* (2008). I found his work personal, intense, true, raw, passionate and bold. He himself has described the relationship between the different media he uses, as well as the source of some of his images and ideas:

Painting is about defining moment like in my films. Characters in my film are in isolation ... *Vigil* is about defining the moment when I was a boy in the Wairarapa. I used to spend a lot of time on my own watching animals, dead and alive. I specially remember when the dead lambs were thrown over the cliff into the river. I was wondering about the transformation of the dead flesh with the eels awaiting down into the river. I was watching hanging from the cliff and I could have easily fallen. I spend a lot of time hunting and fishing. Birds flocking were fascinating. At night I would imagine I would fly. (Ward, 2012)

It is also in these memories that he found inspiration for the recent exhibitions. He used to draw a lot as a child and painting was his first love; he went on to study art and has a degree in fine arts. His films, as are his paintings, are about scaling and light. In the

painting as in *Vigil* (a film he made when he was only 28 years old) the main character is a female (a young girl in *Vigil*): “I suppose I identify woman with the most vulnerable part of myself; I use highly symbolic images as visual narratives”, he said, when I asked him about his choice (Ward, 2012).

Ward is a filmmaker who explores boundaries in the form of his artistic expression as well as in his quest into the human psyche. His films are intense, beautiful, poetic, intelligent, powerful, surprising, questioning, entrancing and moving. His most critically acclaimed film, and most recent one, *Rain of the Children*, a mix of drama and documentary, relates the story of Puihi, a Tuhoe woman. Ward produced, directed and wrote this film, one that has haunted him for nearly three decades.

It all started when Ward was 21, and he was making the film *In Spring One Plants Alone*. For 18 months, he observed the relationship between a mother, 80 year old Puihi caring on her own for her son, Niki, (a 40 year old who was diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic) while Ward was living with them. Nancy Tait (Ngai Tuhoe), who is Ward’s cultural adviser said: “When he first came to our valley, deep in the Ureweras, and we saw that Pākehā was staying among us for 18 months, we really thought he was the crazy one” (Tait, 2012). Puihi became known as the burdened one, the one who lives between both worlds, the word of the living and the word of the dead, constantly praying to the spirits. Puihi had grown up in a community ruled by the Māori Prophet, Rua Kenana, and had married his eldest son at the age of 12. In preparation for *Rain of the Children*, Ward interviewed Māori elders and the film grew from the relationship he created with the community which was manifested in the fact that many Tuhoe participated in the film, some recreating scenes that depicted their tupuna or ancestors. This makes the strength of the film: it is their perspective of the story that has been given expression by the filmmaker, including his own perspective as a Pākehā, intercut with early footage from *In Spring One Plants Alone*. The fact he was filming in short shoots, with a small budget and a small crew, allowed him to let the material find its own form (Ward, 2012). Ward works with the process, and works with the community, not in isolation.

In the exhibition *Inhale*, there is a picture of Niki (the actor playing Niki) who has been beaten up and is found naked in the street, a white wild horse coming towards him. This is Puihi’s only surviving child. Puihi believed that even in her death she would be with her son and would come in the form of an animal. It is not unusual in the Urewera to find wild horses. This particular horse came towards Niki (the actor) and the elders, who were watching the film being made, were very moved as it conveyed a truth about the way Niki had lived his life. Puihi and Niki’s story (they passed away before the film was made) was put together with the views and beliefs about the living and the dead held by the local people.

Niki has three friends: his mum, his cat, and the neighbour’s white horse which no one else could approach. “Beaten and left on his own in the street, Niki is a symbol of how people with psychosis are too often treated in society,” explained Maree Martinovitch (2012). Nancy Tait (Tuhoe), iwi co-producer of the film, added:

The white horse came to the marae before the day Niki was taken to the cemetery and 100 birds perched on the cemetery when Niki was buried. My great



grandmother raised me in the tradition of the Tuhoe. She was a traditional healer and before the Pākehā imposed a ban on traditional healing there were not such things as mental illness; people were thought to have a gift, the gift of talking to the spirits. The healer would take the person to a special place and very few of us knew the knowledge. Until Vincent came, the knowledge was locked away. (Tait, 2012)

In and through his work, Vincent Ward gave voice to traditional beliefs and used his arts to help healing the community.

In 2007 Vincent Ward received the Order of New Zealand Merit for his contribution to film. He is the first New Zealand artist to have a solo exhibition at the Shanghai Biennale, held October 2012 — March 2013. His work has won recognition internationally including in 1982, the Grand Prix du Cinema du Réel, France, for *In Spring One Plants Alone*; in 1999 he was the winner at the Academy Award for Best visual effects and breakthroughs for *What Dreams May Come* and he received six nominations at the New Zealand Screen Awards for *River Queen* (2005) including best picture. He is a national treasure. To enter his world you can go to his website: www.vincentwardfilms.com or purchase the stunning full-colour book *Inhale/Exhale* (Ward, 2012), available in all good fine art stores.

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