

The Colonial Elephant in the Room: Michael Parekōwhai's The Lighthouse and Captain James Cook.

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Imperial rule has long been supported by the establishment of monuments. However, in our current climate of tumultuous politics and failing social systems, these monuments occupy increasingly shaky ground. Given a growing crusade against monumental statues the public silence on Michael Parekōwhai's statue of Captain James Cook in The Lighthouse (Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand, 2017) is deafening. In Aotearoa New Zealand, Captain James Cook is a familiar, albeit divisive, figure. To some, Cook is known as a British navigator, explorer, and cartographer; a founder of nations, friend to natives, with enlightened and scientific motivations. To indigenous communities, Cook was the thief, murderer, and kidnapper who knowingly spread disease when arriving in the Pacific with the intent to find ample land for the British Crown to colonise. This essay explores the significance of the statue of Cook within The Lighthouse, particularly in relation to the legacy of colonial monuments and memorialisation. In The Lighthouse, sculptor Michael Parekōwhai recasts Cook as a complex emblem of personal and collective identity, highlighting issues of place, legacy, and sovereignty. Parekōwhai revises the role of the colonial monument, reclaiming Cook as an instrument in the balancing of historical and national narratives.

KEYWORDS # Captain James Cook # Colonial monument # Colonisation
Michael Parekōwhai # The Lighthouse # Aotearoa New Zealand # Public art
Statue # Identity

“Public statues not only help to legitimate structures of authority and dominance but are also used to challenge and resist such structures and to cultivate alternative narratives of identity.”¹

Imperial rule has long been supported by the establishment of monuments. From the Emperor Augustus to Queen Victoria, conquerors have used monumental structures to communicate their authority and foster reverence. For centuries they have stood strong as proud products of imperialism. However, these monuments occupy increasingly shaky ground. Across the world, monumental statues of late and ‘great’ imperialists are being challenged. At the University of Oxford, England, students protested the presence of South African politician Cecil Rhodes’s statue.² Long-growing tensions over statues of Confederate leader Robert E. Lee erupted into violence in Charlottesville, USA, leading to the death of one and injury of many.³ The death of George Floyd and consequent global escalation of the Black Lives Matter movement brought urgency to the debate around colonial monuments, and saw many monuments topple.⁴ In Aotearoa New Zealand, monuments to colonial figures such as Captain John Hamilton and Sir George Grey have increasingly become sites of protest.⁵ A University of Otago (Ōtepoti, Dunedin) study found that of the 123 statues of historical figures on public land, nearly a quarter have been attacked at least once.⁶ Given the growing crusade against imperial monuments, and what they represent, the public silence on Auckland’s Captain James Cook sculpture is deafening.⁷

The representational figurative sculpture of Captain James Cook is part of *The Lighthouse*⁸ a controversial work by the sculptor Michael Parekōwhai (Ngā Ariki Kaipūtahi, Ngāti Whakarongo, Rongowhakaata),⁹ an artist renowned for his ground-breaking art that saw him represent Aotearoa in the 2011 Venice Biennale. One might be hard pressed to find an Aucklander who has not heard of this work, which was unveiled in February 2017 on Auckland City’s prominent Queen’s Wharf. Organised by Auckland Council, and funded principally by realtors Barfoot & Thompson, the 1.5 million-dollar sculpture is the largest gift of public art Tāmaki Makaurau has ever received.¹⁰ From the outset the work was controversial: media and public attention has focused on the 1950s state-house exterior of the work, and what such an iconic structure represents.¹¹ However, if one peers inside the home, something even more intriguing is revealed. Among the colourful constellations that adorn the home’s walls is a shiny, over-life-sized statue of Captain James Cook, captured in a moment of contemplation.¹²



FIGURE 1. The Lighthouse by Michael Parekōwhai. Photo Courtesy of the Auckland City Council. Photographer Jinki Cambroner.

While the irony of a real-estate company funding a million-dollar sculpture of a state-house (given the current housing crisis and historical failure of New Zealand’s social housing system) has not been lost on many, discussion of Captain Cook’s presence within the work has been notably absent. This essay addresses the situation by exploring the significance of the statue of Cook within *The Lighthouse*, particularly in relation to the legacy of colonial monuments and memorialisation. In *The Lighthouse*, sculptor Michael Parekōwhai recasts Cook as a complex emblem of personal and collective identity, highlighting issues of place, legacy, and sovereignty. Parekōwhai revises the role of the colonial monument, reclaiming Cook as an instrument in the balancing of historical and national narratives.



FIGURE 2. The Lighthouse by Michael Parekōwhai. Photo Courtesy of the Auckland City Council. Photographer Jinki Cambroner

In Aotearoa New Zealand, Captain James Cook is a familiar, albeit divisive, figure. In settler-based narratives, Cook is known as a British navigator, explorer, and cartographer; a founder of nations, friend to natives, with enlightened and scientific motivations. To Indigenous communities, Cook was the thief, murderer, and kidnapper who knowingly spread disease when arriving in the Pacific with the intent to find ample land for the British Crown to colonise. Upon the arrival of Cook and his company in New Zealand in October 1769, several events unfolded which have been described in a variety of ways – meetings, skirmishes, misunderstandings, and the ever-popular label, encounters.¹³ Regardless of how the events are characterised, the outcome is the same: Rongowhakaata¹⁴ Māori were raped, infected, kidnapped, murdered, and otherwise injured by those aboard Cook's ship, the *HMS Endeavour*. And these first 'encounters' were only the beginning. Cook's voyages to New Zealand laid the foundation for colonial expansion and marked the beginning of what was the attempted annihilation of the Māori culture and population which, even today, communities continue to battle against.

The actions and consequences of Cook's voyages in Aotearoa¹⁵ are only just beginning to be openly discussed on the public stage, becoming a major topic of discussion with the advent of the *Tuia 250* celebrations in 2019, a commemoration of 250 years since Cook and his company landed on New Zealand soil.¹⁶ Questions around the commemoration of a man largely responsible for unspeakable loss for the Rongowhakaata Māori and ongoing pain for Indigenous communities have started an important and necessary debate around memorialising such a figure. Māori scholar Tina Ngata (Ngāti Porou), an important figure in the debates around *Tuia 250*, highlights that colonial power is ratified by Cook's memorialisation:

'If we accept that these commemorative events are one of those tools that sit alongside the statues and the memorial days that function to uphold colonisation then our participation becomes problematic, it becomes a kind of endorsement.'¹⁷

In New Zealand alone there are thirteen monuments to Cook, while more than one hundred exist around the globe.¹⁸ The most notable monuments to Cook in New Zealand are two statues in Gisborne, both of which have been the objects of political resistance. The 'Crook Cook' statue on Kaiti Hill was recently relocated to the local Tairāwhiti Museum after years of vandalism, including being doused in red paint in 2016 as a symbol of Māori bloodshed.¹⁹ Another Cook statue along the Gisborne (Tūranganui-a-Kiwa) riverside walkway has endured its own attacks, graffitied with the words 'Thief Pakeha'²⁰ and 'This is Our Land' during *Tuia 250* protests in 2019.²¹ This statue was again graffitied in accordance with the worldwide Black Lives Matter protests in 2020: the paint read 'Black Lives Matter and so do Māori'.²² The defacement of New Zealand's Cooks echoes the treatment of Cook monuments in Australia. At St Kilda, Melbourne in 2018 his statue was painted pink and scrawled with the words 'No Pride' written alongside the Aboriginal flag. Sydney's Hyde Park statue was defaced in 2017 with graffiti reading 'No Pride in Genocide' and 'Change the Date.' The Hyde Park²³ monument was defaced again during Black Lives Matter protests in 2020.²⁴

On the surface, sustained attacks on statues of a fallen eighteenth-century navigator may appear futile. These statues are mere physical material, carved and cold: but they do not simply represent Captain James Cook. The commissioning and construction of monuments to Cook is a part of the

nation-building process, in which settlers impose authority by erecting images that embody both the past and present power of the state. Michael Billig labels this kind of nation-building 'banal nationalism' where the nation is reproduced through everyday reminders of nationality, including statues.²⁶ As Ngata states, these statues of Cook that depict him as a heroic peacemaker are, for Indigenous communities around the Pacific, indicative of the misremembering of colonial history and of their communities' present-day struggle against the colonial forces that Cook epitomises.²⁷ Just as Cook represents the power of colonisers, he also represents the ongoing struggle and pain of the colonised. In Aotearoa New Zealand, Cook is an ultimate monument to colonisation, representing both its actions and its consequences that have come to shape the country's current national identity. As art historian Nicholas Thomas states:

'Cook is never just a dead man: he is an emblem of a moment in history and, for many people, still a national founder figure. What is unavoidably celebrated, then, is not just Cook or Cook's response, but something of the nation that came after him.'²⁸

In light of its central location in Auckland and significant media coverage of Michael Parekōwhai's *The Lighthouse*, one might have expected discussion of Cook to take centre stage or, at an extreme, that the work might experience an onslaught of vandalism. It might also have attracted a critique akin to that of other monuments to him, such as those in Gisborne and Australia. In fact, little attention has been paid to Cook's presence in Auckland's 'lighthouse'. Even the controversies of the *Tuia 250* celebrations did not generate any discourse around Parekōwhai's Cook. It would be too simple to suggest that people do not know that Cook is seated inside the edifice: he is a well-lit, over-life-size statue. And it would be equally unfair to assume that people choose not to consider the statue due to the ambiguous nature of the work. So why is it that Cook is not being discussed? Might it be that the statue has been neither significantly critiqued nor discussed because no one knows quite what to say? Auckland's Cook is unlike any Cook we have ever seen. This is not Cook as we have known him.

Parekōwhai's statue of Cook takes the popular historical representation of Cook (such as the Gisborne statues) and turns them on their head. The heroic, idealised and proud Cook is instead fashioned as a forlorn, flawed man. The usually active Cook, armed and primed for action is here

passive, slumped and defenseless, seated on a model-making table that he grips onto, as his legs dangle, like those of a child, not quite reaching the floor. The Cook we see is not the confident conqueror we have become accustomed to; he appears uncertain and pensive. It is as if we have peered inside his office and caught him before or after a battle, when all the guises of strength and sureness are stripped down and we are left simply with a man, one who is reflecting on the destruction left in his wake or considering what devastation may lay before him. Parekōwhai's new portrayal of Cook levels him, revealing Cook to be just a man, not the figurehead of colonial power that he has been constructed to be.

This is not Parekōwhai's first attempt at taking on a New Zealand icon. The artist has previously critiqued the work of renowned New Zealand painters Colin McCahon and Gordon Walters.²⁹ Both artists produced work that can be considered 'culturally complex' (to put it mildly) and for this have been both heroicised and villainised in the public eye, not unlike Cook. Just as he did with McCahon and Walters' work, Parekōwhai creates an inversion of Cook. The artist satirizes his subjects and in so doing strips them of their iconic status that has historically held them beyond judgement. He shows us James Cook the individual, with personal motives and justifications. Anthropologist Annette Hamilton suggests that in commemorative art there exists a hidden dialogue between viewer and monument, one that commands both remembrance and reverence.³⁰ The dialogue in this instance is unclear. Does Cook's simple humanity allow us to consider his actions from a more grounded standpoint? Is the traditional colonial authority of the figure diminished? Should we feel sympathy or resentment? The ambiguity allows us to create our own conclusions, offering a new pathway to viewing Cook. What is certain is that the separation of imperial ideology from the individual dismantles the iconic status paid to Cook, perhaps with the hope that this might enact a dismantling of the system he stands for.

What motivates Parekōwhai to use the largest public art commission in Auckland to critique a colonial figure? The answer is personal. Born in 1968 in Porirua, in the North Island of New Zealand, Michael Parekōwhai is half European and half Māori (Ngā Ariki Kaipūtahi, Ngāti Whakarongo, Rongowhakaata). As a Rongowhakaata Māori, Cook is a major part of the artist's history and whakapapa.³¹ Yet Parekōwhai is also Pākehā, meaning his European ancestry is enabled by the colonisation of Aotearoa that followed Cook's voyages. Therefore, Cook is a complicated part of Parekōwhai's identity. Parekōwhai often uses his practice to explore notions of identity, into which he finds ways to

interrogate colonial histories by pushing against accepted beliefs and unchallenged narratives.³² Therefore, his Captain Cook in *The Lighthouse* can be considered a continuation of Parekōwhai's wider practice and a work that holds immense significance for the artist.

While Parekōwhai's portrayal of Cook encourages us to consider his interiority, the sculpture's materiality implicates the work's surroundings. Instead of using bronze or marble to represent Cook – materials which are loaded with historical European concepts of aesthetics, beauty and authority – Parekōwhai casts his statue in stainless steel. The glossy, mirrored surface of the work is a nod to American artist Jeff Koons's work, imbuing the same quality of plasticity and playfulness.³³ The reflective surface of the work brings Cook into the modern world in a material way and also functionally in that the statue becomes a representation not only of Cook but also what he reflects. His surroundings become another actor in the work. Therefore, it is no surprise that Parekōwhai has carefully considered the work's surroundings. Inside *The Lighthouse*, Cook is dwarfed by an empty space. The gleaming white room appears evacuated, cleared out. However, the emptiness is interrupted by a mass of bright LED shapes and squiggles that cover the walls and windows of the house's interior. These lights represent the constellations around New Zealand, a navigational tool for both Māori and European explorers. Timed in a sequence, the lights move around Cook so that he is constantly encompassed by their glow, he is at their mercy. One final feature of the work is still to be installed: a neon matariki star cluster³⁴ including signatures from the Treaty of Waitangi,³⁵ which will add further to the layered meaning of the work.

Observing Cook from various standpoints around the lighthouse/state-house structure, his figure reflects off the ocean, as well as off Auckland's main street, Queen Street, and the viewers themselves. The work's location is vital to its meaning. Standing not on land but rather a wharf, the work projects into the Hauraki Gulf, which flows out to the ocean surrounding Aotearoa's shores, including the East Coast of the North Island where Cook and his company landed in 1769. *The Lighthouse* looks out towards Auckland's North Shore where Parekōwhai grew up and also to Bastion Point, land which was the focus of a long-running land dispute before being returned to Māori in the 1980s.³⁶ The artist states that the neon constellations invoke the concept of ahi kā,³⁷ the Māori notion that title to land has been won through whakapapa's continuous defence and occupation of the land, effectively keeping the home fires burning, the lights on. Ahi kā is Ngāti Whātua at Bastion Point, Rongowhakaata



FIGURE 3. Captain Cook in the interior of 'The Lighthouse' by Michael Parekōwhai. Photo courtesy of the Auckland City Council. Photographer David St George.

in Gisborne, and Māori across New Zealand who fight for decolonisation. Parekōwhai strengthens the significance of this idea by seating Cook in front of an empty fireplace, suggesting that while his fire has long burnt out, the fire of Māori communities continues to burn bright as they swirl around him in full technicolour. Furthermore, Parekōwhai's sculpture could be seen to be its own protest occupation, occupying a prime piece of real estate in Auckland's CBD, with Cook imprisoned within its walls.

Parekōwhai's portrait figure of Cook also exists independently of *The Lighthouse*, in a stand-alone version titled *The English Channel*. This statue has been exhibited extensively in Australia, most notably at QAGOMA³⁸ in Brisbane in 2011 and at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, where it was installed in 2015. These presentations of Parekōwhai's Captain Cook further illustrate the importance the artist places on the siting of the work and its environment. At the Art Gallery of New South Wales, *The English Channel* was displayed in front of a large window looking out to the harbor where Cook and his company landed in 1770. Four years earlier, the comprehensive exhibition of Parekōwhai's oeuvre, *The Promised Land* at Brisbane's QAGOMA in 2011, seems to have been a test kitchen for *The Lighthouse*. There, visitors were greeted to an installation

finally removed from the Civic Square in 2020. After years of debate, the decision was triggered by Black Lives Matter.⁴⁶ However, in *The Lighthouse*, Parekōwhai illustrates that there is yet another path to challenging colonial monuments.

Challenging Cook head on, the artist completely shifts the portrayal from hero to human, using a reflective form to amplify the meaning of the figure. While the downtown Auckland work is a statue of Cook, it is also a figurehead of Māori resistance, New Zealand's housing crisis, Pacific and European navigation, the viewer, and the artist himself. Parekōwhai has taken the failing form of the colonial monument and created a piece of public art that conveys a narrative that is complex and involved, considering not only Cook's historical impact but New Zealanders own current endorsement of him through celebrations such as *Tuia 250*. Unlike the formal colonial monument that instructs with a clear narrative and directive, in *The Lighthouse* there is no informative plaque, there is not even a label to tell us what the work is called, let alone who we see when we peer through the windows of the house. Parekōwhai knowingly evades any set interpretation of his work by creating ideological obstacles, encouraging viewers to engage with the work and draw their own conclusions.⁴⁷ And it is the work's ambiguity that gives it impact. The artist explains:

‘It is not the object that contains the importance, but how we see and interpret what the object contains, what exists around it, and the shadow that the object casts.’⁴⁸

It is the role of public art to excite, start conversations, push the limits, question the unquestioned. As an artist who has been consistently cast in the role of a trickster,⁴⁹ in *The Lighthouse* Parekōwhai creates a work that evades explanation, stirring public discourse and challenging histories. He entices the viewer to contemplate and interrogate preconceived notions about art, history, legacy, and memorialisation. In a country with an abundance of symbols of colonial power, *The Lighthouse* is a timely reminder that official histories are constructed by the victor, but that there are always multiple viewpoints and stories to be recorded and considered. Parekōwhai's Captain Cook is a timely reminder, even before the surge in worldwide recognition of the Black Lives Matter movement, that monuments are living makers of meaning, meaning that stands to be dismantled in the face of continuing injustice.

The question remains: why has Parekōwhai's Cook been ignored? Global Black Lives Matter activism put colonial

monuments – and the role they play in building and upholding prejudice – in the spotlight. So why do we ignore their critique on our soil? Majority politics have long held New Zealand above the discrimination and injustice taking place overseas, preferring instead to create a mythic image of Aotearoa as a clean, green, beautiful haven from all that is wicked. The ugly truth is that our country is built on systemic violence against Māori that began with Cook's arrival and has continued into the present day where Māori continue to face inequality and brutality. And if this makes us uncomfortable, it should. We should be ashamed, and many are. But rather than moving through this shame, towards knowledge and action, we sink into it. We overlook Cook, we dismiss decolonisation, we rebuff protest. Because we would much rather forget than reflect.

The Lighthouse is about reflection: the reflections that play off Cook and reflections on the history of Aotearoa New Zealand, Cook's place in New Zealanders' personal and collective identities, and the role of colonial monuments in modern art and discourse. A lighthouse is defined as a beacon of light, a force that both welcomes and warns. It also shows a way forward, signalling a new destination. Parekōwhai's *The Lighthouse* illustrates that monuments to complex figures and histories can be used in a way that is productive, one that challenges accepted historical narratives and creates new discourse around our history and society. All we need to do is start the conversation.

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ENDNOTES

1. Yvonne Whelan in Ewan Morris, "Men Alone, in Bronze and Stone: A Tale of Two Statues," *Journal of New Zealand Studies* 13 (2012): 71.
2. Castle, "Debate Over Cecil Rhodes Statue at Oxford Gains Steam."
3. Fortin, "The Statue at the Centre of the Charlottesville Storm."
4. Grovier, "Black Lives Matter protests: Why are statues so powerful?": The Bristol monument to Edward Colston, 18th century philanthropist involved in the Atlantic slave trade, was toppled in June 2020 while monuments to Christopher Columbus and other colonial figures were similarly defaced and removed throughout Europe and the United States.
5. Captain John Fane Charles Hamilton was a British Naval Commander who fought for the Crown during the New Zealand Land Wars. His monument in Hamilton was defaced with red paint and a hammer: Tarabay, "How Charlottesville's Echoes Forced New Zealand to Confront Its History." Sir George Grey was a British Colonial Administrator, serving as Governor and 11th Premier during the 19th century. His statue in Auckland CBD has faced numerous attacks: Phillips, "Memorials and monuments - Civilian memorials, 1900-1945."
6. Leahy, "Black Lives Matter protests: The Kiwi colonial-era statues that pose some problems."
7. Captain James Cook was a British explorer who is known for his three voyages to the Pacific where he was the first to make contact with eastern Australia and the Hawaiian Islands. Cook was also a skilled cartographer and navigator, and was responsible for the first recorded circumnavigation of New Zealand.
8. For images see <https://ourauckland.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/articles/news/2017/02/the-lighthouse-michael-parekowhai/>
9. Michael Parekowhai's tribal (iwi) affiliations in parentheses.
10. Barfoot & Thompson funded the sculpture to commemorate its 90th year in business: "The Lighthouse lights up." Our Auckland.
11. See Lana Lopesi's excellent article on The Lighthouse, "An Homage, a Beacon: On Michael Parekowhai's 'The Lighthouse'."
12. The seated statue is 2.57 metres high and fabricated in highly polished stainless steel.
13. Detailed information on the balanced and detailed revisionist history of New Zealand can be found in books and articles by New Zealand historian Michael King.
14. Rongowhakaata is a Māori iwi (a Māori community or people) of the Gisborne region of New Zealand in the east of the North Island.
15. Aotearoa is the Māori name for New Zealand.
16. Tuia is the Māori word for 'to weave or bind together.' The Tuia 250 celebrations were named as such due to their intention to tell an integrated narrative of Cook's voyages.
17. Ngata, "Capt. Cook: A genocidal murderer."
18. Phillips, "Memorials and monuments - Civilian memorials, 1900-1945."
19. Wallace, "Gisborne's 'Crook Cook' - the story of the statue."
20. Pakeha is the Māori term for a New Zealander of European descent.
21. Braae, "The Bulletin: Vandalised Captain Cook statue shows depth of wounds."
22. "Captain James Cook statue defaced in Gisborne." *New Zealand Herald*
23. "Captain Cook statue vandalised in Melbourne before Australia Day." *The Guardian*; Knaus, "No pride in genocide: vandals deface Captain Cook statue in Sydney's Hyde Park"
24. Sanda, "Captain Cook statue defaced in Sydney, Australia."
25. Hamilton, "Monuments and memory," 104-105.
26. Morris, "Men Alone, in Bronze and Stone: A Tale of Two Statues," 71.
27. Ngata, "Toppling cook: On remembering vs misremembering," 46-47.
28. Thomas, "The uses of Captain Cook: early exploration in the public history of Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia," 149.
29. In *The Indefinite Article*, 1990, Parekowhai plays on Colin McCahon's *I Am*, 1954. Parekowhai satirizes the work, using word-play to interrogate language, identity, and the ego-centricity of the artist: Leonard, "Michael Parekowhai: Against Purity," 2. In *Kiss the Baby Goodbye*, 1994, Parekowhai creates a kitset of Gordon Walter's koru painting *Kahukura*, 1968, questioning the appropriation of Māori imagery whilst referencing the modernist aesthetic of the readymade: Leonard, "Michael Parekowhai: Kiss the Baby Goodbye."
30. Hamilton, "Monuments and memory," 105.
31. Whakapapa is the Māori term for a line of descent from one's ancestors; genealogy.
32. See Michael Parekowhai's *On First Looking at Chapman's Homer*, 2011, his installation at the Venice Biennale or *Ten Guitars*, 2000.
33. Cheshire, "Opinion: Michael Parekowhai's The Lighthouse."
34. Matariki is the Māori name for the star cluster that is also known as the Pleiades.
35. The Treaty of Waitangi (Te Tiriti o Waitangi) is the treaty between the British Crown and Māori chiefs from the North Island of New Zealand, first signed on February 6, 1840.
36. "Bastion Point." *New Zealand History*.
37. "The Lighthouse lights up." *Our Auckland*.
38. The Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art.
39. Devenport, "Michael Parekowhai: The Promised Land,"; Leonard, "Michael Parekowhai: The Empire of Light," 6.
40. Leonard, "Michael Parekowhai: Kapa Haka Pakaka,"
41. Byrt, "State house rules: Michael Parekowhai's sculpture is Auckland's new best thing," 6.
42. Tukutuku panelling is a traditional Māori art form of latticework used to decorate meeting houses.
43. Cheshire, "Opinion: Michael Parekowhai's The Lighthouse."
44. "Where do Confederate Monuments go after they come down?"
45. Forbes, "Call for Otahuhu colonial memorial to go."
46. "Controversial statue of Captain John Hamilton has been removed." *Radio New Zealand*.
47. Divett, "Movement from the margins: Identity issues in the art of Michael Parekowhai and Ani O'Neill."
48. Michael Parekowhai in Divett, "Movement from the margins: Identity issues in the art of Michael Parekowhai and Ani O'Neill."
49. Leonard, "Michael Parekowhai: Against Purity," 2.