

In Heimler and Proc's current *Gauguin in Aotearoa* series, the viewer is invited to take a mind-bending journey through time, culture, and art history. At first glance, one sees imagery that is all too familiar to students of late 19th century art: Paul Gauguin's Polynesian women, taking up most of the picture plane and lounging silently in their typical poses with bodies (and occasionally clothing) painted with broad expanses of flat, saturated color. Eternally doomed to be objects of the male gaze, or at least of Gauguin's gaze, they look out at the viewer with blank stares. This time, however, their undulating bodies with oversized hands and feet appear even more distorted than we remember from our art history books. This is because they are rendered in Heimler and Proc's unique figurative style, which seems somehow perfectly suited to Gauguin's figures. In some of the works, surprisingly, these Polynesian women are joined by white European women and an occasional man, most of whom are integrated very naturally into the scenes - indeed, these contemporary folks appear to be quite a home in Gauguin's timeless idyll. Caught slightly off-guard by this detour from the world of Gauguin that viewers are accustomed to, we continue to adjust and attempt to discern just exactly where we are.

As we study the scenes presented in each painting, other unexpected things begin to come into focus: The presence of *manaia* carved figures or symbols, spiritually charged with *mana* and guarding against evil, which suggest either the interior of a Maori meeting house, or the intersection of the earthly and ancestral realms; rocky shorelines or mountainous backdrops recognizable as those found in New Zealand; a scene which jumps briefly forward in time to evoke Der Blau Reiter school; and finally, Gauguin himself, or his spirit, peering out from behind the body of his model, here transformed from sensual Tahitian into suntanned, short-haired blonde, or in another work, Gauguin chatting in a doorway with Heimler and Proc themselves!

What are we to make of these scenes? Are they a celebration of cross-cultural inspiration by contemporary European expats who live in New Zealand and admire Maori art and culture? Or are they modern day appropriations of Maori symbolism and Gauguin's subjects, who were so masterfully appropriated by Gauguin in the first place? In considering the multiple levels of meaning and association expressed in these works, I believe the key to understanding them lies a bit deeper, just as they did for Gauguin and others of his generation.

Speculation regarding the role of appropriation in creative expression seem to nag critics and historians more now than ever before. In today's media-saturated world where it is believed that nothing created now can be considered truly original, cultural appropriation is nevertheless frowned upon and fraught with political implications, particularly when initiated by individuals perceived to be in a position of privilege. At the same time, a driving quest for authenticity makes appropriation virtually impossible to avoid, particularly with imagery from around the world now at our fingertips.

I would argue that for Heimler and Proc, this body of work successfully navigates potentially thorny territory because they have made these subjects and scenes their own. Taking Gauguin's brief sojourn in Auckland and the sketches of Moari carvings that he produced there as a spiritual point of departure, Heimler and Proc create a hybrid blending of time and history to bring scenes of an imaginary encounter with Gauguin and his visual world to life in energized detail. In so doing, they provide viewers with a fresh perspective on the historical legacy of Gauguin, the visual and spiritual potency of Maori art, and the cultural vibrancy of contemporary life in New Zealand today.

Alice R. Burmeister, Ph.D.