

Being not doing

**An interview with artist Andrew Panoho
Samples of Faith exhibition, Christchurch,
1-5 October, 2002.**

A Maori artist of Nga Puhi descent living and working in a studio in London over the last six years, stumbled across a copy of the *CS News* and discovered a group of artists he would love to be connected to. Back in New Zealand, and now based in Blenheim with his young family, Andrew Panoho eventually caught up with the Chrysalis Seed Trust during his exhibition *Samples of Faith* in Christchurch.

Andrew began a full time painting practise after leaving Ilam with a Masters of Fine Art in 1989. His first major exhibition was a group show, "Contemporary New Zealand Artists," at the Sarjeant gallery in Wanganui. He works in water colours (primarily three pigments) but on a colossal scale, purposely stretching the boundaries of that discipline.

As a Christian artist, do you think there is still a place for meta-narratives (like the Gospel) in so-called post-modern art when everything is decentralised, devolved, diluted and relative?

"Post-modernism" is a Eurocentric world view,

a western vantage that doesn't take into account the abstract art traditions and cosmologies of other great cultures throughout the world. In one sense it is like the "great discoveries" of the European maritime seafarers who sailed across the world "finding" already inhabited continents to claim ownership. The western terms of "Modernism" and "Post Modernism" have a semblance of the imperial arrogance of 19th-century colonialists who ignored what already existed. Europeans did not invent abstraction. It amuses me when I hear Eurocentric academics preaching the 120-year-old western-centred arts gospel according to their own anachronistic cultural projections. Maori abstract art traditions are at least 800 years old and probably many thousands of years old.

Are you a "Christian artist" or an "artist who is also a Christian"?

Those are two definitions that European Christians angst about too much - they are irrelevant. They're just not questions I'm interested in.

So, you take a quite holistic approach to art?

It's about the source of our identity. God is the Supreme Being, not the Supreme Doing. God enjoys being Himself. He didn't need to create the universe to validate Himself, God created it out of his own sense of being. I too am a human being made in the image and likeness of my Maker - I am not a 'human doing.' I don't create for someone else or to cognitively fit into some pre-described abstract cerebral definition. I paint mostly because it is who I am. My vocation comes out of my being. Doing is an outworking of being.

I hope this isn't sounding too esoteric. To me this has been a wonderful discovery that has set me free creatively. For much of my life I was a task/performance-oriented person who was very broken because of my family background. I lacked many of the basic building blocks of identity and was enslaved performing to the gallery of life around me. God in his grace stopped my dysfunctions, taking time with me. He connected me to people in London who retaught me to 'be' His son. Some of my figurative paintings record that journey of healing.

I can see Van Gogh in your work, are there any other specific influences?

Yes, Van Gogh. If you read his letters to his brother Theo you get a glimpse of the huge heart that undergirded his physical work - great integrity. Pablo Picasso, for his drafting skill base; Edvard Munch, for his ability to articulate deep feelings and inner pain and his physical use of paint and also his drafting ability; Colin McCahon because he tapped into a depth of Maori spirituality, and expressed that spirituality through the western view frame.

Why watercolours?

I enjoy the medium beyond what is traditionally expected. I see watercolour as 'petite' and refined and wanted to expand it to a solid and monumental level yet retain its ethereal subtlety. There is a spirituality to water colours - the fluid nature of the layers, the transparency. After experimenting for a year I selected three pigments as my main palette. They unite my diverse work and subject matter.

Andrew Panoho's exhibition featured a variety of large watercolour figural works (from 134 x 153 to 173 x 134) exploring such themes as boyhood to manhood, transitions, death, life and resurrection. He also exhibited four abstract kowhaiwhai (serpentine rafter paintings) and word paintings.



Towards manhood, Andrew Panoho, 2002, watercolour on paper, 173 x 134 cm.



Andrew Panoho at the Arts Centre, Christchurch.