



# The Local Global Post Colonial

## New Directions in the Work of Robert Jahnke

ANNA-MARIE WHITE

Robert Jahnke (Ngati Porou) has been a leading figure in the contemporary Maori art movement for more than two decades. His sculptural work has consistently responded to political issues that concern Maori. In his scholarly writing, he has importantly defined aspects of customary and contemporary Maori art. As an art educator, he promotes Maori knowledge and traditions and provides critical support to Maori artists and students.

Jahnke's most recent art work, however, indicates new directions. The exhibition *Cogito Ergo Sum* (9–26 September 2011) moves from his previous concerns with collective (tribal/national) Maori issues to international debates on cultural essentialism. This exhibition contributes to these debates by expressing concepts of Maori identity from an individualist perspective.

*Cogito Ergo Sum* comprised a set of text-based 'relief paintings': black stainless steel panels inscribed with text in sprayed white enamel. Each painting makes a statement beginning with 'IAM . . .' and refers to theory that Jahnke has identified as influential to Maori identity discourses. This includes the work of post-colonial scholars such as Edward Said ('IAM / DIASPORA'), Homi K. Bhabha ('IAM / AHYBRIDIDENTITY'), and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak ('IAM / SUBALTERN'). The exhibition also references the infamous right-wing media campaign ('IAM IWI IAM KIWI') by John Ansell for the 2005 National Party election campaign, and expresses optimism for Aborigine in multi-cultural Australia under a Labour government ('IAM WHITE / RED / YELLOW / COLOURBLIND').

Described in this way, these seem like a disparate set of references. Yet the artist's intent to communicate an ambitious message is clear. This is evident in the way that Jahnke has reduced this work to a bare minimum; the design of the paintings is regulated by the 'IAM' motif in a white sans serif font on a black plane.<sup>1</sup> Jahnke has also disregarded any decorative or illustrative element and for the most part, shed the industrial Gothic style of his sculptural work from the last decade. Instead these paintings represent, quite possibly, the most uniform and utilitarian art works in Maori art history.

These changes can be traced to recent international experiences. Since 2008 Jahnke has been involved in a seminar group comprising indigenous scholars, primarily from North America, who study the concept of essentialism in the fields of art, culture and heritage.<sup>2</sup> In May 2011, the group held the conference, 'Essentially Indigenous,' at the New York branch of the Smithsonian Institute National Museum of the American Indian. This conference posed the question: 'What is it about a work of art by a Native artist that makes it Native? . . . Is there something essential we can or should define?'<sup>3</sup>

At this event, Jahnke gave the paper 'Indigenous Aesthetic Paradigms: Community and the Artist,' which promoted essentialist definitions of contemporary Maori art and identity. Firstly he defined Maori art as the output of any artist who identifies as Maori. This established his position in regard to the question of 'what is Maori art,' which has been an ongoing and contentious issue in this field. In its place, Jahnke offered a classification system to account for the many styles of Maori art, from the customary to the conceptual.<sup>4</sup>

(opposite) *Cogito Ergo Sum* at Paul Nache Gallery, Gisborne, September 2011

(right above)  
ROBERT JAHNKE *IAM SUBALTERN* (*Salt of the earth*) 2011  
Lacquer on stainless steel, 1000 x 1000 mm.

(right below)  
ROBERT JAHNKE *IAM DIASPORA* (*This is not my home*) 2011  
Lacquer on stainless steel, 1000 x 1000 mm.

In order to accept all styles of art made by Maori, Jahnke specified essentialist concepts of Maori identity as a necessary condition. Importantly, his approach challenged those interpretations and criticisms of essentialism as a traditionalist doctrine. Specifically, Jahnke rebutted a point made by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak during a visit to New Zealand in 2002, who warned Maori to:

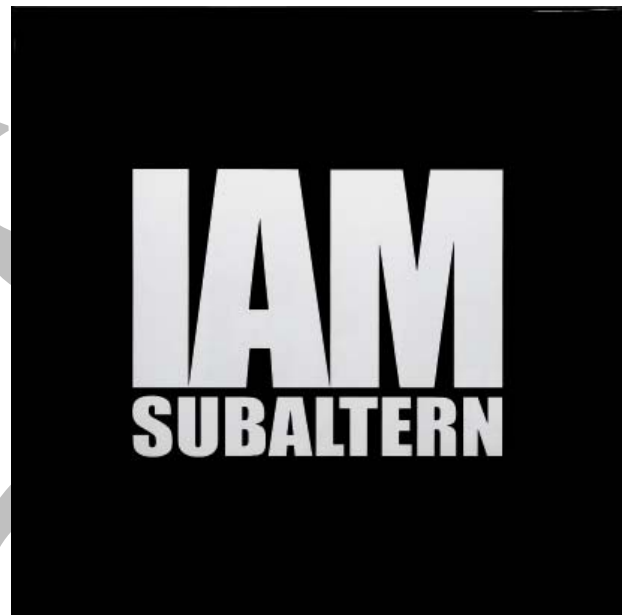
avoid donning the essentialist yoke since cultural fossilisation engenders cultural stagnation and that any perpetuation of a traditional mindset is a sign of an incapacity to translate customary cultural values and beliefs into relevant codes of practice.<sup>5</sup>

*Cogito Ergo Sum* continues this investigation of essentialism. In fact Jahnke reacts against Spivak's warning and attempts to prove that essentialist frameworks do not preclude innovation in Maori art. *Cogito Ergo Sum* may therefore, be considered as having two purposes: the first, to promote essentialist concepts of identity in a global academic context and based on Jahnke's experience as Maori as his example; and secondly, to demonstrate innovation in Maori art. In this respect, *Cogito Ergo Sum* represents what art historian, Hal Foster, has described as a 'reflective dialogue between global trends and local traditions.'<sup>6</sup>

The ambitious scope of this exhibition is immediately signalled by its title. *Cogito ergo sum*, better known in English as 'I think therefore I am,' is the well-known statement of philosopher Rene Descartes (1596-1650). This maxim summarises his treatise, *Discourse on Method* from 1637, in which he proposed a system of knowledge based on fundamental principles or 'truths.' His method of determining truth involved a process of scepticism and deductive logic, bringing everything into question and reconstructing a framework of knowledge based on that which is proved beyond doubt. Descartes' initial conclusion, 'I am thinking therefore I exist' established *thought* as the first fundamental principle of knowledge.

*Cogito Ergo Sum* observes this method. Each painting in the exhibition represents a theory, opinion or event that has influenced concepts of Maori identity in academic or political discourses. Jahnke has subjected each idea to interrogation, considering its relevance to his personal experience as Maori and involvement in Maori education and political movements.

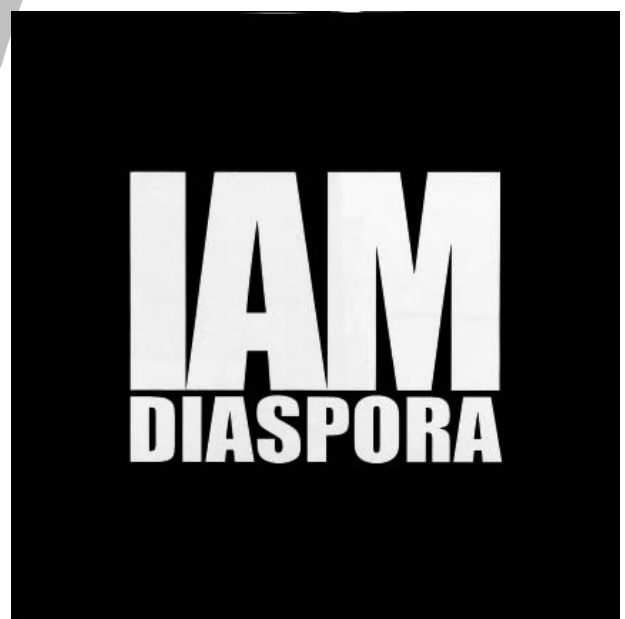
This process is recorded in the titles of the paintings, which run counter to the inscriptions in the work. For example, *IAM DIASPORA* is subtitled (*This is not my land*), which draws attention to some implications of the diaspora concept for Maori. Broadly defined, diaspora describes the involuntary

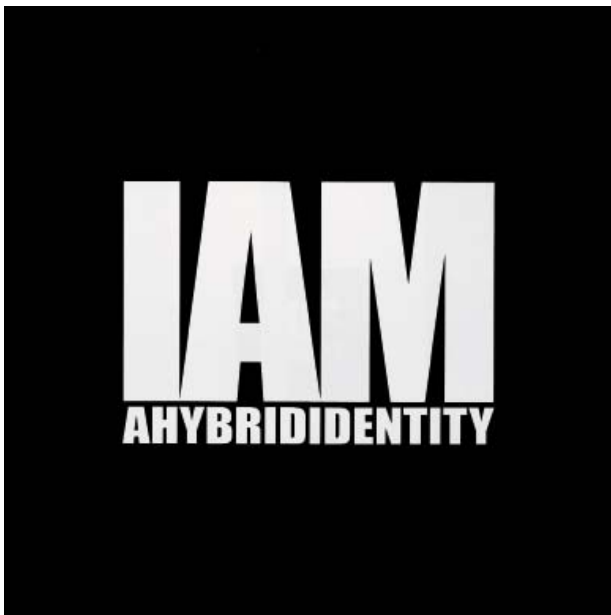


dispersion of peoples from their ancestral homelands. In post-colonial studies, expatriates may identify themselves as 'diaspora.' While contemporary life requires many Maori to reside in the city, as Jahnke does, diaspora is to define oneself in exile or to acknowledge a landless position.

This is contrary to Maori frameworks of identity, which are defined according to a matrix of geographic markers—mountains, rivers, boundaries and marae. Diaspora also overlooks the many Maori who continue to reside in their ancestral region, the expectation that urban Maori will return to these locations for major events and the ceaseless efforts of Maori to seek the return of ancestral lands that were unjustly confiscated. These realities suggest that diaspora contradicts these persistent and defining concepts of Maori society, which otherwise represent essential principles of Maori identity.

This idea is further tested in *IAM IWI IAM KIWI* (*This land is my land, this land is your land*). The 'Iwi/Kiwi' National Party election campaign of 2005 protested against the Labour Government's Foreshore and





Seabed legislation of the year before. This campaign fuelled the perception that this legislation gave Maori special rights to the New Zealand coastline. Ironically, this legislation was also the subject of protest by Maori nationwide who believed that the legislation failed to recognise rightful Maori claim to these areas as guaranteed by the Treaty of Waitangi.

*I AM IWI I AM KIWI* summarises this latter perspective; that Maori do, in fact, have special rights as the first people of Aotearoa New Zealand. Where Ansell's campaign manipulated this status and recast Maori in the role of separatists and dispossessors, Jahnke subverts this meaning. By changing the wording Jahnke identifies the two identities—tribal and national—that Maori may claim, and the status this accords. This status does come with responsibilities. For Jahnke, this includes privileging his Maori identity over other identities, and this kind of allegiance is essential to positive concepts of Maori identity.

The principle of allegiance and self-identification is also raised in *I AM A HYBRID IDENTITY (Sitting on*



(left above) ROBERT JAHNKE  
*I AM A HYBRID IDENTITY (Sitting on the fence)* 2011  
Lacquer on stainless steel, 1000 x 1000 mm.

(left below) ROBERT JAHNKE  
*I THINK THEREFORE I AM (Cogito Ergo Sum)* 2011  
Lacquer on stainless steel, 1000 x 1000 mm.

(opposite)  
ROBERT JAHNKE *I AM WHITE, I AM RED, I AM YELLOW, I AM COLOURBLIND (Some of my best friends are coloured too)* 2011  
Lacquer on stainless steel, 2000 x 2000 mm.

*the Fence*). This references the influential writings of Homi Bhabha on the subject of hybridity.<sup>7</sup> Hybridity emerged as a counter-argument to essentialist concepts of culture and is a key theory in post-colonial studies. It emphasises the process and effects of exchange between cultures and is regarded as a more legitimate position from which to analyse the reality of identity in a global context. Jahnke, however, rejects hybridity as an equivocal position that undermines his right to determine his identity as Maori.

While Jahnke advocates for essentialist expressions of Maori identity, this does not mean that he promotes a homogenised Maori ideal. Rather the complexity of Maori diversity is addressed in *I AM SUBALTERN (Salt of the Earth)*. Subaltern is a term used to describe the colonised cultures of the South Asian subcontinent. It is also the subject of Spivak's seminal 1988 text, *Can the Subaltern Speak*<sup>8</sup>. Spivak defines the subaltern as a marginalised person or group who has no recourse to economic power or political representation. The subaltern may only be known and understood through representation by a member of a more privileged group who has access to the requisite corridors of power. Their privilege excludes them from identifying as subaltern, even if they had done so previously.

The subtitle of this painting, (*Salt of the Earth*), implies that subaltern are also the most valuable and authentic members of a culture; that their isolation enables them to maintain aspects of cultural practice that is denied to others. This art work also suggests the existence of subaltern Maori communities, presumably rural, living on ancestral lands and according to Maori custom. To invoke this idea, however, involves the other: that Maori who work at representative levels in the public and private sectors, as Jahnke does, have been assimilated into western society to such a degree that they cannot claim to belong to the group but only act as a representative. Or to quote Spivak: 'postcolonial intellectuals learn that their privilege is their loss.'<sup>9</sup>

While *Cogito Ergo Sum* makes many bold claims, this is where Jahnke's endeavour is most prone to criticism. Jahnke has drawn extensively on his personal and subjective experience to present an argument for essentialist concepts of Maori identity. This task has been undertaken with such confidence that it may appear he has dismissed Spivak's critique of subaltern representation.

It is telling, however, that Jahnke has presented this exhibition at Paul Nache Gallery in Gisborne. For all intents and purposes, this site is approximate to this Ngati Porou artist's turangawaewae (his place to



stand). It is, of course, more typical to associate the concept of turangawaewae with the marae, which for Jahnke is Taharora at Waipiro Bay, 100 kilometres north of Gisborne. However, Paul Nache Gallery represents a different, though equally appropriate context for contemporary art of this nature.

Given the ambition of this exhibition and the multitude of challenges that he has issued, Jahnke has, in effect, sought the security and authority offered by his turangawaewae—the nexus of his identity as Maori. From this position he has made bold, ideological statements about Maori identity and asserted his inalienable right to identify as a Maori artist. Importantly, he has presented these ideas to his people first, seeking their opinion and consent, before moving into a national and global arena. These practices give assuredness to the artist and strength to art work, which might easily be dismissed as overly academic and theoretically irrelevant to mainstream New Zealand art concerns.

1. There is one art work in this exhibition that features colour. *IAM WHITE, RED, YELLOW, COLOURBLIND* (Some of my best friends are

*coloured*) uses the said colours on each panel and the combination of four panels references the Aboriginal flag. This use of colour differentiates this work as a kind of epilogue or indication of future developments and concerns.

2. See [http://sarweb.org/?iarc\\_contemporary\\_native\\_arts](http://sarweb.org/?iarc_contemporary_native_arts) for a list of participants and details of a previous seminar meeting. Accessed 28 September 2011.

3. [http://www.nmai.si.edu/collaboration/files/EssentiallyIndigenous\\_Guide.pdf](http://www.nmai.si.edu/collaboration/files/EssentiallyIndigenous_Guide.pdf). Accessed 28 September 2011.

4. These terms are a major subject of Jahnke's doctoral thesis. Robert Jahnke, 'He tataitanga ahua toi: the house that Riwai built, a continuum of Maori art' [unpublished PhD thesis]. Massey University, Palmerston North, 2006.

5. Spivak quoted in Robert Jahnke, *MAORIMADE* [exhibition catalogue], Paul Nache Gallery, Gisborne, 2010, p. 6. The statement was made by Spivak as the keynote speaker at the 2002 'Indigenous Art, Heritage and the Politics of Identity' conference, organized by Robert Jahnke in partnership with the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa and Te Manawa, Palmerston North.

6. Hal Foster, 'Les Magiciens de la terre,' in Hal Foster (et.al.). *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1989, p. 617.

7. Homi Bhabha, *The location of culture*, Routledge, London & New York, 1994.

8. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Eds.). *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1988, pp. 217–315.

9. *ibid*, p. 296.