

Chris Charteris

b.1966

Te Rarawa Marae

*Wasekaseka*¹ is based on a traditional style of Fijian necklace made from split whale teeth. Worn by Fijian males as a sign of status and used as trading currency, historical wasekaseka were made by Tongan boat builders and whale hunters who spent time trading in Fiji.

Chris Charteris responded to wasekaseka as part of his ongoing research into the 'evolution of forms'. His starting point is a cultural past or tradition that is, in John Pule's words, "steeped in imagery and meaning". It is also a trove of carved functional and decorative forms. Charteris is looking for formal 'edges' where innovation can happen. He uses his knowledge of oral traditions and mythology, he studies taonga and he learns through working with his hands.

The necklace has been removed from its original context – Charteris's *Wasekaseka* can be worn by either sex. Where the original was made from ivory-coloured whale teeth, his is made from black perspex – a material chosen for its modernity as well as its lightness and strength.² Each element is carved in a near-identical form that has been abstracted from the original whale tooth.

Charteris's work has a formal purity and a respect for craft (he sees himself as a 'maker') that's comparable with mid-20th century Modernist sculptors like Constantin Brancusi, Henry Moore and Isamu Noguchi. The affinity exists not because Charteris has been influenced by them, but because in the 20th century, Western artists were influenced by African and Oceanic art. Although its influence was acknowledged by Western art historians and curators, so-called primitive art was deemed to belong in museums, not art galleries. Contemporary art (with a capital C) was assumed to be the domain of metropolitan centres like Paris, London and New York.

All that changed in 1989 when a huge landmark exhibition, *Magiciens De La Terre (Magicians Of The Earth)*, at the Pompidou Centre in Paris exhibited artists from far-flung corners of the globe alongside leading metropolitan artists. *Magiciens* raised many issues and generated extensive debate, but the subsequent dialogue opened up space for artists from regions like Africa, Asia and the Middle East to participate in the international contemporary art world. Cultural identity – personal and political – has been a central

concern in the work of many of these artists. Not only as a response to historical colonialism, but also to the complexities of globalisation.

Charteris's interest in identity has a deeply personal root. As an adopted child, he was raised in a Pākehā family and told he was Māori. His education as a carver was on the marae. Then he found out that in fact he was not Māori, but of Micronesian and English ancestry. Not surprisingly he felt confused – both personally and culturally. His initial reaction, as an artist, was to cease (temporarily) using Māori forms and to embark on a journey through Polynesian and Micronesian art to find where he belonged.

It's a journey that has nourished his art. The cross-pollination between Micronesian, Polynesian, Māori and European forms is now at the core of his practice.

Gerald Barnett

¹ *Wasekaseka* was made for the exhibition *Pasifika Styles*, organised by Cambridge University, United Kingdom.

² Perspex dust is also toxic and Charteris has ceased using it.

Galleries and museums:

www.artcyclopedia.com

www.fhegalleries.com

www.janneland.co.nz

www.pasifikastyles.org.uk

www.tepapa.govt.nz

Web search:

African art

Constantin Brancusi

Magiciens De La Terre

Henry Moore

Isamu Noguchi

Oceanic art

Traditional wasekaseka

