

Darryn George

b.1970

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Got any idea who Ihaia/Isaiah was? It's useful to know, especially if you want to have a closer look at the painting.

Isaiah comes from the Bible. He was an Old Testament prophet called by God to be a messenger for his people, the Israelites. In a vision of the heavenly throne room, Isaiah hears God's promise of the coming of a Messiah or Saviour who will liberate the people and free the nation. But the Saviour revealed to Isaiah is no lycra-suited Superman. For this Saviour will suffer as the people have suffered and be as Isaiah prophesises, "despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief". According to Isaiah, the Messiah who will deliver the people out of exile shall be spat on and abused, humiliated and beaten, nailed to a cross and killed but, Isaiah says, because of this suffering the nation will be saved, for it is "with His stripes we are healed".¹

Other than a fairly veiled abstract reference to the biting lashes ('His stripes') of the whip during the flagellation of Christ, and the naming of Isaiah in the title, there does not appear to be much in Darryn George's painting, *Ihaia/Isaiah*, to suggest the impact of Christianity on the evolution of a Māori spiritual world view. But have a closer look and you'll find quite a vigorous discussion going on.

First off, it is likely that *Ihaia/Isaiah* is a work from the series called *Tipuna*² in which paintings were named by George after his Ngāpuhi ancestors. He identifies the person in both Māori and in English, the Māori name being a direct parallel or transliteration of the biblical name. This declaration of dual identity probably refers to the adoption of he ara hou (the new Christian spiritual path) by George's ancestors from the North. Very early in the process of colonisation, Ngāpuhi reconciled the message of the 19th century missionary evangelists with their own indigenous spiritual concepts and practices.

You can also see a kind of hip-hop balancing act in *Ihaia/Isaiah*. This sense of the artist's ongoing negotiation in his work possibly reflects his personal feeling about the Tai Tokerau encounter with Christianity which, though historically fraught, still appears to spring with 'New Age joy and lyricism'. It is worth mentioning that such a feeling is "completely absent from the existential angst that permeates the Northland-based landscapes of New Zealand's most famous painter, Colin McCahon".³ Where the Pākehā artist railed against the dark

and lamented the death of God, George optimistically looks toward the light and the promise of deliverance to come.

George is one of the contemporary Māori artists belonging to the hiko or digital generation. Although *Ihaia/Isaiah* has a homespun, 1970s retro-crochet feel, George's technique and approach, particularly his use of computer software to develop colour combinations and image layering, indicates the importance of electronic media for his art making.

In *Ihaia/Isaiah*, formal repetition of vertical and horizontal lines come together in a stylised puhoro or spiral shape – a traditional pattern often found in Māori carving and moko design. George also draws on the conventions of Op art and formal abstraction: manipulating positive and negative space and playing with colour relations and the way they generate meaning. An optical effect occurs in *Ihaia/Isaiah* where stripes of stippled red and white are overwhelmed by – and succumb to – the contrasting intensity of high gloss, fluoro green and black. But surfaces like these are optically elusive and difficult to figure out exactly, because how the painting looks almost certainly changes according to the available light and the position of the viewer.

Cushla Parekowhai

¹ Isaiah 50:3–5 Old Testament Bible.

² *Tipuna*, exhibition at Adam Art Gallery, Victoria University, Wellington, 2004.

³ Mane-Wheoki, J. *Darryn George: Ngā Ata O Ngā Tipuna – Shadows Of The Ancestors*, Te Papa Tongarewa.

Artist website:

www.darryngeorge.com

Galleries and museums:

www.brookegiffordgallery.co.nz

www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

www.cs.org.nz

www.gowlangsfordgallery.co.nz

Web search:

Colin McCahon

Moko

Op art

