

From the collection

When Māori-Chinese artist Buck Nin died aged only 54, the high-ranked turnout of representatives from many tribes, along with a who's who of the contemporary Māori art movement, was testament to the larger-than-life presence Nin had established in the community. Renowned as an artist, entrepreneur and teacher, he was not only among the first generation of Māori artists to make their mark in the Western world of contemporary art; he actively nurtured the talent of many more who followed.

An early influence on Nin was Selwyn Wilson, who taught him at Northland College in Kaikohe. In 1951, Wilson was the first Māori to graduate from the University's Elam School of Fine Arts and no doubt he influenced the already talented Nin, Dux of Northland College in 1960, to follow in his footsteps.

Moving to Auckland, Nin spent many nights discussing art, politics and land issues at De Brett's Hotel, which had become the haunt of a radical group that included Selwyn Muru, Darcy Nicholas, Don Selwyn and Hone Tuwhare. While studying at Elam, he encountered Senior Lecturer Robert Ellis, whose abstracted paintings of swirling urban road networks left a noticeable impression on him.

Nin completed his studies at Canterbury in 1965 and soon after found himself at the helm of the first curated exhibition of Māori art in a mainstream institution – New Zealand Māori Culture and the Contemporary Scene at Canterbury Museum in 1966, later touring to Wellington, Australia, Western Samoa, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong and Japan.

Nin's teaching career began at Bay of Islands College in 1967 and continued at Church College of New Zealand in Hamilton, where he worked on and off for 20 years, interspersed with an energetic

exhibiting career and further studies in the USA, completing a PhD in Administration Arts and Management in 1981 and then helping Rongo Wetere establish Te Wananga o Aotearoa.

As well as his direct influence as teacher to such artists as Kura Te Waru Rewiri, Nin was part of a first generation of Māori artists who moved to the city and forged a bridge between the traditions of Māori art they had grown up with, and a new means of expression that engaged the technologies and issues of the day. While some considered Māori culture a dying form, Nin was busy creating a new, distinctive New Zealand art from the marriage of two cultures.

An important experience for Nin was the period from 1976-1977 when he and his students helped restore the historic Rongopai marae near Gisborne, renowned for its characteristic mixture of post-colonial motifs and painted designs. Nin responded with his Triptych series, totalling 20 panels of metaphysical landscapes, seething with fluorescent renditions of traditional motifs, layered like the carvings on a canoe prow and thrusting through the land.

Rangitoto, the work Nin was commissioned by Pat Hanly to produce for the then new Commerce C building at The University of Auckland, clearly follows in this tradition with its weaving of ancestral roots that energise and anchor Auckland's hilly, volcanic terrain, much like the rocks he had to continually remove from his parents' Northland market garden.

Andrew Clifford

Art



Buck Nin (1942-1996)

Rangitoto, 1984

Acrylic on hardboard, 2030 x 2250

The University of Auckland Art Collection