

# From the collection



Little River Hei Tiki (*female, Ngai Tahu*) 2003, C-type print, 1960 x 1600mm.

Pregnant with mystery, this huge image of a hei tiki glowing against a dark background is magnetically attractive. It is one of a range of

Cinderella artefacts – those deemed by curators as too imperfect to exhibit – brought to light by Ngai Tahu photographer Fiona Pardington. Working towards her MFA at the Elam School of Fine Arts in 2002-2003, she trawled through collections of her iwi's taonga at Auckland Museum and Okains Bay Māori and Colonial Museum on Banks Peninsula. It took her up to 18 months to seek and obtain permission from each relevant hapu to photograph their taonga for this project.

Making each image was also a complex process. Using 16 flashes during a single long exposure, she made a portrait of each hei tiki, which she hand-printed, then rephotographed it on a large-format colour negative which was printed commercially on a large scale as a C-type. Known as coupler or chromogenic prints, C-types are made using a three-layered paper sensitive to red, green or blue light. Light selectively affects each layer to form a latent image, and each coupler in the paper can form a dye colour that is complementary to the layer when the print is developed using chemicals. Even though the image is black and white, this printing process brings warmth and subtlety to the contrasts of light and shadow, imbuing the pounamu with lustre and bringing the hei tiki to life. While her

## Art

subject remains ostensibly a still life, Pardington directs the viewer's attention to the politics of museums and collections.

Presenting of a suite of nine contact prints of hei tiki by Fiona Pardington to the Musée de Quai Branly in Paris was one of New Zealand's first initiatives in cultural diplomacy in 2005. Billed as featuring indigenous art, cultures and civilisations from Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas, this museum's creation marks a shift away from collecting and displaying artefacts from other cultures as the spoils of the colonies. Previously contained within the ethnographic department of the Museum of Mankind and the Museum of African and Oceanic Arts, its collections of hei tiki would once have been displayed with labels identifying them as neck pendants fashioned from adzes in the form of a human foetus, used as a fertility symbol and worn by women. Fiona Pardington's work returns the interpretation to Māori, her process seeming to release the light held in the hei tiki, suggesting the mana that they develop after being handed on to successive generations of wearers.

It is on display in the Gus Fisher Gallery as part of the exhibition *Close-Up* until 5 July.

Linda Tyler