

From the art collection

Made out of bitumen-impregnated paper, this cruet set of concertina fans won't cool anyone off.

Hanging like three little piupiu on the wall, patterned by kowhaiwhai shapes and titled after an American torch song, the installed work gives a wave in the direction of the artist's Ngai Tahu ancestry while fanning the flames of land loss grievance. Contributing to a content trickling down from the Māori love story explaining the origin of the Waiau and Clarence Rivers in the South Island, the artist works the construction association inherent in her material. Once called tar paper, the basic black builder's paper cut-out is simultaneously doing steel-capped heavy duty and pirouetting as lightweight decoration. It is meant to form a waterproof membrane in a roof or walls but, carved up by a stanley knife, it makes an alluring play of light and shadows.

As Nobel prize-winning author Toni Morrison knew when she titled her 1981 novel *Tar Baby*, the Uncle Remus fable has come to refer to a sticky situation or a difficult problem which is only aggravated by attempts to solve it; tar paper is a perfect metaphor for Treaty issues in Aotearoa. Reconciliation chimes in with the lament known from the well-known lyrics of the song that lends a title to the work, "Now you say you're sorry for being so untrue/ Well, you can cry me a river, cry me a river, I cried a river over you." Tears have an established place in Māori design. In tututuku weaving, the albatross tears pattern makes for a descending stair shape while in kowhaiwhai, the roimata shape is symbolic of sadness. Each of Hutchinson's folded forms presents a single tear drop, arranged in



formation so that the lower two contain the slender tributaries of the larger whole above. Blackness comes with the territory and is in the material. It is both the darkness of Te Po, a point of origin, and a destination, representing as it does ethnic identity and, more recently, solidarity.

No cry baby, Hutchinson adds her tears to those of other Māori artists who have dealt with loss of land, when she was commissioned to make this work for the Population Health building at Tamaki. She invoked the spirit of the recent Ngai Tahu Claims Settlement Act (1998) where the cultural, spiritual, historic, and traditional association of the iwi with the Waiau River was asserted. She upholds the mauri of the Waiau River in its critical relationship with Ngai Tahu whanui as it arises from the mountainous spine of the South Island, crosses the southern edge of the Hanmer Plain, flowing through a

gorge to emerge onto the northern part of the Culverden Plains and then flowing inevitably eastwards to the Pacific Ocean. She depicts the story of the river symbolically, with inverted triangles representing the Waiau-uha (Waiau) and the Waiau-toa (Clarence) Rivers which in Māori lore were originally male and female spirit lovers that dwelt in the Spenser Mountains. Transformed into adjacent rivers, which flowed faster when warm rains melted the snows, these parted lovers lamented their separation in Spring, swelling the river waters with their tears.

Her sculptural practice has evolved beyond the clanging of symbols to include some personal references. As she notes, "I'm developing my own visual language and that is really important for an artist. It's not that I'm copying or appropriating symbols all the time. I use a lot of cultural symbols in my work, such as the kowhaiwhai and the frangipani motif, but I'm developing a lot of my own motifs and I'm starting to combine them with some of the cultural motifs."

Banished to the corridors outside the classroom for disruption during her schooldays, she has succeeded in making a triumphant emblem out of the paper darts she once threw.

Linda Tyler

Lonnie Hutchinson (Ngai Tahu, Samoa), *Cry Me a River*, triptych, 2004, black builder's paper, 2480 x 2580mm, each 1240 x 900mm.