

From the collection

Art



Shane Cotton, *Tunatown Dreaming Moerewa* 1979, 2001, acrylic on canvas, 700 x 1000mm.

Working with imagery related to Te Tai Tokerau, his Ngapuhi turangawaewae, artist Shane Cotton has, for over 20 years, produced landscape paintings combining historical and contemporary elements.

For him, there can be no geography without history, and his works indicate some of the ways in which the land was already a narrative before he came to represent it.

Never merely illustrations, Cotton's paintings make meaning through many layers of complex symbolism, and often include profiles of the Northland coast and the sacred maunga (mountain) Maungaturoto.

From his *Black Out* series based on Penetana Papahurihia's nationalist movement of 1835 whose followers met in darkness to summon spirits, this painting has organic shapes emerging

from the night like paintings of *The Dreaming* which inform and narrate Aboriginal consciousness. These shapes appear as if dreamt by the occupant of the tent at the bottom of the painting.

Centrally placed is a Ngapuhi writhing eel form, perhaps the nakahi or spirit which appeared to Papahurihia in a flash of light as he slept, symbolising a vision to be fulfilled. Orbiting around this are a black robin, a swivel table, a couple dancing, a pair of supplicant hands, and an inverted tree. Texts referring to the inside and outside of things written in Hongi Hika's alphabet surface like speech bubbles: "Ke ana waho, Ana roto pu".

Written across the bottom of the painting, the title is the most transparent text of all. It points to events which took place in 1979 when, in the

words of Māori Party MP Hone Harawira, Moerewa became a little town with a big reputation.

In July of that year, a Black Power member from the area assaulted a member of the rival Storm Troopers in Auckland, and around 50 Storm Troopers travelled north to Okaihau on 3 August, looking for revenge. Wrecking the hotel where they had been drinking, they confronted the two police who tried to intervene, before moving on to Moerewa, where they destroyed a fire engine, fracturing the skull, face and jaw of a police sergeant as they tried to throw him back into the van which they had set alight. The Storm Troopers finally dispersed when police shot one of them in the leg. Later, half of the group were convicted on charges ranging from grievous bodily harm to criminal damage and sentenced to between four months' and eight years' imprisonment, making this the most serious gang-related incident ever to have occurred in New Zealand.

Moerewa had grown from the relocation of Taitokerau-wide Māori who had become landless by the end of World War Two, and were moved into abandoned American transit huts. This settlement came to be known as Tuna Town, as the operations of the Allied Farmers Freezing Company (AFFCO) there led to the development of a thriving population of tuna whakakeke – the silver bellied eel – in the nearby river.

While it boomed in the 1970s, the scaling back of AFFCO in 1994 led to mass unemployment for the population, which is 80 percent Māori. By 2001 when this painting was made, Reverend Ngahau Davis had revitalised the town again.

Cotton remarks: "The only way to move forward is to come to terms with what has happened... revisiting can bring clarity to our own existence in the present", and attempts to demonstrate this with a depiction of Moerewa as a place with a future, as well as a past.