

A Pointed Message: Rārangi-1

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A NEW WORK BY MICHAEL REED

On my desk sits an artwork by Michael Reed. Rārangi 1 (2019) is a hybrid object, and sits somewhere between the traditions of printmaking, sculpture and the medallion. The work takes the form of a dart folded from a thin A5 sheet of copper (final size 150x 40x 150mm). This deceptively modest work carries some of the most important words ever to be translated into over 500 of the world’s languages: Article 1 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (1948). The words are etched in Te Reo Māori, the language of the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand:

Rārangi 1

Ko te katoa o nga tāngata i te whanaungatanga mai e wātea anā i nga here katoa; e tauriterite ana hoki ngā mana me nga tika. E whakawhiwhia anā hoki ki a rātou te ngākau whai whakaaro me te hinengaro mōhio ki te tika me te he, a e tika anā kia meinga te māhī a tētahi ki tētahi me ma rōtō atu i te wairua o te noho tāhi, anō he tēina he tuākana i ringa i te whakaaro kotahi.

Translation

Article 1

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

In this essay, using the example of Rārangi 1, I hope to show that Reed (born 1950, Christchurch, New Zealand) is, in my opinion, one of the most innovative and observant of New Zealand’s contemporary artists. While he is best known for his contributions to printmaking, with prints such as Just Testing? Sit and Watch on the Atoll Range (1993) and Binding Statements (1999), he is, by his own admission, an artist who is hard to pin down.

Reed’s experimental practice is underpinned by a

life-long commitment to the ever-versatile medium of printmaking and the ideals of social justice. In a career spanning five decades, he has never been stuck for ideas or the right ways to express them[1]. He has been exhibiting steadily since the 1970s, often alongside better-known New Zealand artists such as Barry Cleavin, Ralph Hotere, Gordon Walters and Don Peebles (Brooke Gifford Gallery, 1977). He is the recipient of numerous national and international awards, and his work, which has been shown in Australia, South America, Cuba, the United States, Europe and Japan, is held in



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1. Rārangi 1 (2019) Dart by Michael Reed. Etched and folded copper sheet

Figure 2. Rārangi 1 (2019) Dart by Michael Reed. Etched and folded copper sheet. Alternate view

collections all over the world, including the British Museum (Reed, 2017).

Rārangi 1 is one of his most recent works and proof that Reed is committed to delivering potent messages in a variety of ways, ranging from using many different of printmaking techniques to the design of medallions. The latter have received much international attention (Freeman- Moir, 2005). Reed first exhibited a medallion at the 1991 New Zealand Contemporary Medallion Group (NZCMG) show, at the invitation of Christchurch art dealer and free-lance curator Grant Banbury. He has contributed to national and international exhibitions of the NZCMG ever since and began to participate in Fédération Internationale de la Médaille d'Art (FIDEM) exhibitions in 1996.



Figure 3

SUBVERSIVE MEDALS

Reed was concerned that he would find the traditional shape of medallions challenging, as he does not like circular formats (Reed, 2017). That said, he also quickly realised the suitability of the medallion in terms of the thematic trajectory of his work in the 1990s. They very soon morphed into openly subversive 'Medals of Dishonour,' reminiscent at times of the mid-20th century anti-war medals by American sculptor David Smith (1906-1965) (Cotter, 1995). Coincidentally, 'Medals of Dishonour' was also the title of a 2009 exhibition at the British Museum. It showcased their special-interest collection of subversive medals, some of which date back to the 17th century (British Museum, 2009)[2].

The medal format provides Reed with an ideal vehicle for his persistent protests against all forms of violence and exploitation. He has capitalized on the double-sided nature of the medallion to show two sides of each issue he chooses to comment on, and often draws on his broad expertise in printmaking to develop his innovative responses. An early example of this is Looking Back, Looking Forward/ An Award for Manufacturing (1999, assembled found metal tin and metal fitting, silk screen and photocopy on paper, 110mm diameter, and silk screen on cotton crepe bandage). For this work, Reed expanded on the visual and technical repertoire developed during his Masters of Fine Arts year, with the medallion's printed 'ribbon' explaining details as to who profits and who suffers the most from the business of war.

In 2008, Reed was approached by Amnesty International New Zealand to design a presentation medal for a South Pacific human-rights defender. As Amnesty International campaigns were initially based on letter writing and petitions, a reference to a folded sheet of paper in dart form, imprinted with Article I of the international Declaration of Human Rights, was one of the four concepts Reed offered to Amnesty International New Zealand. They accepted this alongside a more traditional circular design depicting the fragment of a cell door and a partial face on the reverse. Reed decided to develop both but could not resolve the dart in the traditional bronze casting technique.

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Figure 3. Looking Back, Looking Forward/An Award for Manufacturing (2000) by Michael Reed. Digital and screenprint on paper, dyed and printed bandages, perspex and metal findings, etched steel.

COLLABORATION

Rārangi 1 is the result of a collaboration between the artist and a commercial etching business. Reed first produced a hand-written calligraphic manuscript of the text, which he then scanned and refined by digital means. That way he could achieve greater legibility and more consistent spacing between the individual lines and letters. The resulting digital file was converted to film, placed onto a light sensitive copper sheet, exposed and then etched. The etching process saw the sheet submerged in an acid bath that circulated the acid evenly across the entire surface.

Reed has previously produced etched metal medals and used a screenprinted homemade mixture of etching ground and oil-based screenprinting ink as the acid resist. While the result was sufficiently precise for broader imagery and heavier metals, for the dart he needed a controlled etch on a lighter gauge of metal. The commercial alternative delivered the desired consistency and clarity. For added precision, the etchers also scored the lines on the back of the copper sheet in the same configuration as for an ordinary paper dart. Reed folded the copper sheets himself, a delicate process, which resulted in a limited edition of seven finished works. He then coated the folded darts in a chemical solution to produce a patina effect. As a last step, he lightly polished some of the visible letters to achieve subtle tonal contrasts. Rārangi 1 then is the result of Reed's accumulated experience in etching, screen printing and typographic graphic design. (Reed, 2020)

EQUALITY AND FREEDOM

The metaphor of the paper dart is fitting on several additional levels. Darts are most likely made from scrap paper, and when considered in the context of the blatant abuse of human rights across the world, one could be tempted to say the declaration is not worth the paper it was written on. However, Rārangi 1 is not a piece of everyday ephemera. Made from a metal associated with commemorative objects, its durability, weight and aged appearance add gravitas to the message it carries. While flightless, it still retains a dart's ability to get somebody's attention, which is an apt association given the timelessness and ongoing relevance of the declaration. The oblique reference to objects made from folded paper is also appropriate to the planned exhibition in Japan, home to traditional paper folding techniques .

Rārangi 1 was produced for international contemporary medal exhibition in Tokyo, scheduled for late 2020, and now re-scheduled for 2021. Reed will exhibit there as a member of a small New Zealand group, who decided that Turangawaewae (the Māori word for the 'the place where one has the right to stand/ the place of personal origin') would be their shared theme. It is for this reason that Reed decided to use the Māori version of the 1st Article and he later corrected this to include all the macrons[3] of contemporary written Māori.

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Since he first conceived of the dart, Reed has become increasingly aware that the ideals expressed in Article 1 do not apply equally to all New Zealanders. In fact, despite recent advances in support of Māori, the indigenous people of New Zealand still feature prominently in all the wrong social statistics. Marriott and Sim's (2014) comprehensive study of the social status of New Zealanders shows 'worsening outcomes for Māori and Pacific people. This growing gap in inequality between Māori and Pacific people, and the European population, warrants greater government attention if the gaps are not to continue increasing into the future' (p. 27).

It is in this sense that the dart's political message represents a useful addition to Reed's 'Medals of Dishonour' and his many politically inspired prints. His practice continues the longstanding connection between printmaking and the art of protest, as highlighted, for example, by the work of Callot and Goya. It reminds us how difficult it is to safeguard even the most basic human rights and how this battle needs to be fought again and again in all manner of social and historical contexts. It is so much easier to pin medals to the chest of war veterans and military leaders than to award those who put their life on the line to fight for human freedom, dignity and equality.

To me the dart is also a reminder that how we conduct ourselves in our professional and private lives always has a political dimension. Art may never change the world, but it has the potent ability to stop an audience in their tracks, and to encourage individual viewers to reflect on their personal responsibilities as members of the human family. It is for this reason that Rārangī 1 has pride of place on my desk.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] I write from 30+ years of studying his work. I was also his student once, so experienced firsthand his willingness to experiment.

[2] As of September 2020, the British Museum owns four of Reed's medals, which puts him in illustrious company. For the 2009 exhibition, for example, they commissioned works by renowned international artists such as Jake and Dinos Chapman, Ellen Gallagher, Grayson Perry, and William Kentridge. (British Museum, 2009)

[3] Macrons appear on some of the vowels in contemporary written Māori to indicate more correctly how the word is pronounced by Māori themselves. This is an important development for the indigenous people of New Zealand. It usually lengthens the vowel. In contrast, the United Nations website still uses the old, anglicised version of written Te Reo.

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IMAGE GALLERY



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