

Three Artists in 'Likeness and Character'

Tony Fomison + Yvonne Todd + Sofia Tekela-Smith

this Auckland Art Gallery exhibition runs until April 20

Tony Fomison 1939 - 1990

'My paintings are not illustrations of events any more than they are illustrations of dreams'



Tony Fomison
Self portrait 1977

Tony Fomison had a painting career that spanned three decades, he helped shift the direction of New Zealand's painting by representing the significance that narrative and myth have for contemporary art. Other artists like Charles Goldie or Rita Angus employed story telling in their portraits and landscapes, while Colin McCahon showed biblical stories and characters within a New Zealand environment. Fomison brought stories from history into everyday life to show us what it is like to be alive in Aotearoa.

Tony Fomison trained at the Canterbury University School of Fine Arts (1957-1960) and studied Maori pictographs [rock drawings] in South Canterbury, which stimulated his lifelong interest in Maori culture.

After travelling around Europe (1964 -1967) Fomison returned home to Christchurch and began exhibiting his paintings and drawings nationally. In 1973 Fomison shifted to Auckland where the presence of Maori and Pacific people immediately influenced his art.

As a painter who believed that paintings told stories, Tony Fomison knew his work was that of a visionary. In his art there is always the sense that he sees life as an outsider who looks at society from its edges. He imagined New Zealand becoming the multi-cultural society a generation before the public saw it.



Tony Fomison *The Ponsonby Madonna* 1982-83

The Ponsonby Madonna is unquestionably one of Tony Fomison's most imposing religious paintings. Commissioned during 1982-1983 by St Paul's College, a Roman Catholic Boys school in inner city Auckland, this painting celebrates a Pacific Mary as the mother of a teenager shown as the Pacific Jesus, a contemporary Christ Saviour.

Tony Fomison received his Samoan pe'a in 1980, at the same time as his friend the lawyer Fuimaono Tuiasau. Mark Adam's photograph shows the umusaga (tatau finishing ceremony) at Tuiasau's home in Onehunga.



Mark Adams
At Grotto Road, Onehunga,
10 May 1980 (printed 1995)

Yvonne Todd b. 1972

Many artists use photography to question ideas about portraiture. Yvonne Todd's 'studio portraits' are planned so thoroughly that she creates chilling new beings. The winner of the first Walters Prize in 2002, the selectors said;

Yvonne Todd is a young photographer who draws on commercial photography, including product, wedding, industrial and portrait photographs. Her polished images operate in an ambiguous space between documentary reportage and post-documentary constructed photography, the photo-shopped pictures of girls-next-door parade their makeovers. Betraying her North Shore upbringing, Todd's art brims with social aspiration, highlighting rifts in the social surface. She works in what critic Stella Brennan describes as the gap "between Britney's smoothly Photoshopped teen seductress smirk and the girls at the mall buying crop tops and glitter eyeshadow."



Yvonne Todd 2002, clockwise: Rebecca Weston, Alice Bayke, Maven Fuller, Susan Bunton

Sofia Tekela-Smith b. 1970

Sofia Tekela-Smith considers her art to be an extension of self. She lives in Auckland but traces her artistic gestation back to her childhood on Rotuma¹, where she acquired many of her art-making skills through her observations of older female relatives.



Sofia Tekela-Smith
Buckwheat 2003



Sofia Tekela-Smith
Sofia 2003

These works are 'low relief' sculptures that have their starting point in 1950s interior decoration items which depict 'native' warriors or maidens – today, these items have gone from being the height of bad taste and political incorrectness to being 'collectable'. Tekela-Smith repositions these stereotypical images of exotic peoples so that they become very personal portraits of her close Pacific friends and family. She also adorns these portraits with Pacific-influenced jewellery of her own design. Sofia is part of an increasing number of New Zealand-based Pacific Island artists working in the medium of body adornment and is influenced by her knowledge of Pacific forms, styles and patterns of binding and plaiting. She uses the natural materials of the Pacific including mother of pearl shell, diridamu seeds, cultured pearls, coconut shell, cowrie shell and pounamu.

¹ Rotuma is a volcanic island of approximately 43 sq. kilometers, located at 12 degrees south latitude and 177 degrees east longitude, approximately 465 kilometers north of Fiji. Although the island has been politically part of Fiji since 1881, Rotuman culture more closely resembles that of the Polynesian islands to the east, most noticeably Tonga, Samoa, Futuna and Uvea. Because of their Polynesian appearance and distinctive language, Rotumans now constitute a recognizable minority group within the Republic of Fiji.

Some notes on portraiture

the artist and their subject

Portraits are not always what they seem!

Sometimes the artist pays their subject [the model] to sit for them – telling them how to pose, what mood to express and even what to wear. Charles Goldie paid his subjects and had favourite models that sat for him many times. In his works he was trying to express his own feelings about Maori and there is often a melancholic feeling of sadness or loss.

Sometimes the subject pays the artist to paint their portrait. When a portrait is 'commissioned' in this way, it is usually the sitter who decides what the portrait should communicate about themselves: their appearance, clothes, how they are posed and where. Gottfried Lindauer was commissioned to paint portraits by his Maori subjects as well as by Pakeha. If you look at more works by Lindauer on our collection database, you will see that some choose to wear traditional clothing with symbols of their mana [status], while others wear European dress.

There at least are two examples in this exhibition where the artist and subject were close friends and these works reflect a special bond or understanding. Alan Pearson's *Portrait of the poet, Denys Trussell* 1978 and Rita Angus' *Portrait of Betty Curnow* 1942 are collaborations between the artist and the subject - working together to decide how the portrait should look and what should be included.

the artist is the subject!

There are also six **self portraits** in this exhibition allowing us to look at this genre and think about how and why artists depict themselves. Self portraits often become psychological portraits - more than just being about personality and appearance – here they include:

Alfred O'Keefe	<i>Three score and ten: self portrait</i> 1929
A Lois White	<i>Self portrait (nude at easel)</i> c.1935
Michael Nicholson	<i>Self portrait</i> 1954-1957
Tony Fomison	<i>Self portrait</i> 1977
Tom Kreisler	<i>Self Portrait as Jug</i> 2000
Sofia Tekela-Smith	<i>Sofia</i> 2003
Ben Cauchi	<i>Self portrait</i> 2005

Things to do and think about in *Likeness and Character*

Visiting the gallery provides an opportunity to see real works of art. You can really appreciate how physical qualities like scale, materials and surface textures influence the way you comprehend the work.

Find two examples of portraits where the styles or media are very different. Compare the works and describe how these different approaches to media influence the viewer's response.

Artists leave us 'visual clues', objects and symbols that help us to understand their works and to find meaning in them.

Find a portrait in the exhibition that tells us something about Aotearoa/New Zealand. What are some of the 'visual clues' that help tell story.

When we look at portraits we often wonder what kind of person the subject really is – it would be great to be able to have a conversation with them.

If you were interviewing the subject in one of the portraits – what four questions would you like to ask them?

Can you guess what their responses might be?