

“Finding a way to say it”

To be shocked of the existence of anything we must imagine it gone. Sometimes I forget this and so keep painting to remember, though I am afraid the rescue it may offer is made impotent by its false construction. Is the story real or true even if the images are false like some befuddling, wild, unknown thing, untamed and untamable, sometimes enraptured, sometimes with a cold eye or depicting incommunicable things, like the faint flickering glow of the “almost meaning” or the light star, the ideas coming rapidly, but from this distance infinitely slowly, grief without grandeur. In my paintings there is no time for the passionless response and so meaning is the activity, not the knowing, then the activity of painting is the meaning. So I search for a painting to find meaning, though it would move fleetingly away.

Why Huia feathers? Firstly the feather is the quill, the quill is the pen and the pen is mightier than the sword. The pen is derived from the Fr. pincel, originally an artist small fine brush. Traditional Asian calligraphy was produced by brushes as were the illuminated manuscripts of Middle Eastern and European countries. Secondly most of the paintings in this exhibition are still-lives depicting the tail feathers of the extinct Huia bird. There is nothing more still than that which is extinct. Huia were found in the high ranges in the southern part of the North Island. Their skins and tail plumes, carefully prepared and packed between layers of Totara bark, were sent to Maori tribes in other parts of the country as items of exchange. This behaviour eventually led to the Huia’s extinction.

When brought to some other application the Huia feather is imbued with a meaning outside its original function and writ large can be said to strike home more powerfully, like the quill over the sword. In these new paintings I pay homage to the Huia. My intention is to make good a declaration of the Huia’s extinction through juxtaposition of itself with some of the external influences. This does not bring such entities back but illuminates their loss. They are on the river of no return. The price we pay for over-valuing something may unintentionally lead to its demise. The Huia and the Moa are such examples of this principle. The returns may never recoup the purchase price. Cultural niceties are brought to book in the face of the complete destruction of a non-renewable resource and we are not to know what is the last of anything. I have imbued some of the paintings with levity as if to say “beware! The brightest pills may carry the most bitter and potent medicines”. But for extinction there is no known cure. This artist is however aware of the current interest in cloning and regeneration through gene splicing. So what does this “denatured” representation of the Huia tail feather bode? Before taking on this subject my research involved sculpting similar feathers with a scalpel to form the human profile and totemic tiki-like forms to represent man’s complicity in the “denaturing” and destruction of this environment and culture. When something is created another thing is destroyed. It is an incontrovertible fact of life that we do not know what the end will be.

Paul Jackson, 2007