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CORA-ALLAN WICKLIFFE • ART AFTER THE MOSQUE ATTACKS
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Gonville gothic

Robert Leonard on photographer Tia Ranginui.

Tia Ranginui is a Whanganui photographer whose works range from the polemical and political to the enigmatic and poetic. Her photo *Power* – from the series *The Intellectual Wealth of a Savage Mind* (2015) – is at the polemics-and-politics end. It's a formal portrait of a young woman – the artist's avatar perhaps. She sits defiantly, in a red dress and a balaclava, brandishing a rifle. The photo was taken in Whanganui's Savage Club Hall, a shameful site where, last century, white men goofed off, mimicking Māori, when they should have known better. Behind the sitter, we see caricature-style portraits of key members from back in the day, bare-chested in their piupiu. How embarrassing!

Ranginui's photo suggests that Māori women militants have stormed the racist-sexist citadel, are now in control and have taken a picture to prove it. In fact, no direct force was required. Ranginui simply borrowed the keys.

As offensive as the club once was, its old hall is now a toothless, kitschy remnant, occupied by the local musicians' club. TrinityRoots have played there.

While the work has a serious message – reminding us of the banal and shocking forms racism once took – there is also a witty prankster dimension to it. This combination of politics and play gives the image its ambiguity and kick. The first-glance reading may be simple: this place is under new management; racism and sexism are bad, but times have changed; Māori and women are righteously asserting themselves. But there's something else going on. This young woman, armed and dangerous – an allegorical personification of 'power' – is herself a trope, rather like the Savage Club caricatures that she has superseded (or joined). She too is involved in an act of masquerade, looking to the world like a Zapatista or Pussy Rioter – out of context.

All artworks by and courtesy of Tia Ranginui.
 Opposite: Tia Ranginui, *Power*, from *The Intellectual Wealth of a Savage Mind*, 2015, archival print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag paper.
 Courtesy of the artist

Below: *Christmas Greetings from the Cliff*, from *Hours between Sleep*, 2016, archival print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag paper

In another image from the series, *Property*, the same woman stands on the Savage Club Hall stage, which melds someone's idea of a wharenui with a proscenium. She wears a black mourning dress and a veil, has her arms by her sides, and the rifle is now slung across her back. Again, the image is more questions than answers. Does the stage frame the woman, or does her presence reframe the stage? Who or what is she mourning? Is there about to be a performance? Is *this* the performance? Does the title refer to the building or the woman? I don't think there are right answers, but the image gets mental wheels turning.

Ranginui mines Whanganui as a subject even when politics take the backseat. The place is part of her USP. In the same year she made her *Savage* series, Ranginui found herself battling insomnia following a break-up. Unable to sleep, she took photos at night. Ten resulting images, featuring people and locations, make up her 2016 series *Hours between Sleep*. A boy on a couch and a girl tucked up in bed are both bathed in the cold artificial light of their devices (*Boyhood* and *She's Filled with Secrets*). A troubled-looking youth in a hoodie is buckled into the back seat of a car (*Mister Lonely*). A girl sits alone at the edge of a gloomy motel pool eyeing the photographer (*Oasis Motel*). No one seems too happy.

The location shots are also bleak. There's a dilapidated bungalow with a decrepit picket fence, Christmas lights visible through its window (*Christmas Greetings from the Cliff*). A low-budget motel spruiks its 'Honey Moon Unit' with a tragic love-heart graphic (*A Gonville Honeymoon*). A nondescript walkway seems eerie, because there's no indication why it should even be photographed (*Pathway*). In a dim interior, Axminster carpet, patterned wallpaper, red curtains and an upholstered chair conspire in a miscarriage of taste (*Red Room*).

Hours reads like a series of establishing shots from a film, setting scenes for actions to come. Its pervasive sense of gloom, alienation and exclusion reminds me of Peter Peryer's morbid photo sequence *Gone Home* (1975) and Gaspar Noé's film *Enter the Void* (2009), which is seen from the viewpoint of a departing soul. *Hours* has a similar voyeuristic quality, as if the photographer were hovering over people or lurking outside places in which they sleep – her intentions unclear. We are left to ponder her relationship to her subjects: is she menaced or menacing?

Of course, Ranginui is hardly alienated from this place – it's her neighbourhood. Although her photographs generally show Whanganui as basic and unembellished, they also accord it a haunted dimension. Take, for instance, her two





Property, from
*The Intellectual Wealth
of a Savage Mind*, 2015,
archival print on
Hahnemühle Photo
Rag paper



Tipua, from *Tua o
Tāwauwau/Away with
the Fairies*, 2020, archival
print on Hahnemühle
Photo Rag paper

night shots of nondescript houses miraculously mirrored in glassy flood waters – life continuing inside, despite this surreal inundation (*Suburban Melancholy*, 2015). Other local views include a swan gliding through haze (*Lake Rotokawau, Whanganui*, 2014), a forlorn soccer goal at frost-covered, deserted Peat Park (*Winter, Whanganui III*, 2014), a night swimmer enjoying a public shower at Castlecliff Beach (*Huria*, 2019), and a white horse glimpsed amongst trees across the river (*Mauri III*, 2020).

Ranginui's neighbourhood romance continues in her latest series, *Tua o Tāwauwau/Away with the Fairies*

(2020). In contrast to the gritty, documentary quality of *Hours*, it is stagey and whimsical. Its subject is patupaiarehe – fairy folk. In Māori lore, they are the original people of Aotearoa. They lived in the forests and mountains, building their homes from swirling mists. They were mostly nocturnal – direct sunlight could be fatal to them. They had pale skin and red or fair hair. They could be mischievous. They were known to lure people, especially attractive women, into their company. Redheaded and albino Māori were considered evidence of interbreeding. When Ranginui was a child, her grandfather



Oasis Pool, from *Hours between Sleep*, 2016, archival print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag paper

told her stories about patupaiarehe: about going hunting and being swept into their mist; about their tricks, their laughter, the footprints they left; about them taking a child, but returning her, leaving her in the hollow of a tree trunk.

Patupaiarehe are ambiguous figures. It's been argued that Māori may have confused Abel Tasman's crew for patupaiarehe when they clashed in 1642. Another name for patupaiarehe is 'pākehakeha', a possible source for the word 'Pākehā'. Today, some claim that patupaiarehe were early Europeans who discovered New Zealand before Polynesians. Ranginui dismisses such theories as "full of shit", "exploiting our stories against us", but knows they go with the territory.

Ranginui's six images feature two stunning young redheads, a man and a woman, who consort with mist (special effects generated by a smoke machine and a vape). Mist accompanies them and shrouds them, but their relationship with it isn't clear. Do they produce it or draw it towards them? In one image, the woman stands on a low block wall, marking the edge of someone's property. Is she a trespasser? Is she a sleepwalker? A puff of smoke is perfectly framed between her face and the white guttering and downpipe on the brick house behind her. We are witnesses to a spooky irruption in an otherwise nondescript suburban scene – although its magic has everything to do with the camera's position.

This series was also shot in Gonville and Castlecliff (even though patupaiarehe supposedly live deep in the forest, away from people) and in daylight (though they are nocturnal). Now, it would seem, those fairies are out and

about, living among us; hiding in plain sight, passing for mortal. In the artist's backyard, they play in her dinghy, as if it were a Viking longship. To scramble matters further, the titles of the photographs encompass Māori and Norse references. *Tipua* and *Taniwha* refer to Māori goblins and water demons. *Niflheim* and *Sleepthorn* refer to Norse myth – to the primordial world of mist and to a device for dispatching people to the land of nod. Ranginui herself boasts Norwegian Viking heritage, on her Māori side.

Patupaiarehe may be part of Māori tradition, an expression of a Māori mindset, but within it they already represent an inscrutable, enigmatic other. Ranginui's pictures don't explain anything about them. Here, they could be benign or malevolent, cute or deadly, pathetic or powerful. They are floating signifiers, magnets for conflicting desires, while their own desires remain a mystery. I'm reminded of Bill Hammond's famous bird-people, who are at once birds and people – the birds who preceded people, the Māori who came after, and the colonists who followed them – in a Möbius strip of self and other.

These contrasting series – *Hours between Sleep* and *Tua o Tāwauwau* – read through and past each other like night and day: one is light and theatrical, the other dark and brooding. In one, the photographer observes nocturnal fringe dwellers, displaced, getting about in daylight. She asks: what do *they* want? In the other, she is herself a fringe dweller, out of sorts, wandering about when she should be in her bed. We ask: what does *she* want? Tia Ranginui is one to watch.