About the artist

Michael Parekowhai is one of New Zealand’s most important contemporary artists, showing regularly in New Zealand and internationally in major exhibitions including the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT) in 1999 and 2006. Parekowhai is known for his witty, larger-than-life sculptures, photographs and installations.

Parekowhai was born in Porirua in 1968, of European (pākehā) and Māori (Ngāti Whakarongo) descent. In 1990, he completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland’s Elam School of Fine Arts, and received a teaching diploma from the Auckland College of Education. He returned to Elam and in 2000 obtained a Master of Fine Arts. His public artwork The World Turns 2011–12, a life-sized bronze sculpture of an elephant and native Australian kuril (water rat) is located near the riverfront at GOMA.

The English Channel 2015

This larger-than-life figure of Captain James Cook sits precariously on a tripod bench, in a domestic space. His uniformly glossy surface camouflages the distinctiveness of his period clothing and wig, and his dangling legs are almost childlike, rather than those of an authoritative historical figure. Made from stainless steel, here Captain Cook reflects and deflects all that surrounds him. His posture and facial expression suggest vulnerability, introspection, fatigue; perhaps this records a moment before or after he made a momentous decision, prompting us to think about the consequences of his decisions in history. Parekowhai’s sculpture nudges the collective national memory of both New Zealand and Australia, questioning what is remembered and omitted, what information is retained as important, what is taught in schools, and how we adorn our public spaces.

Primary

How do the colour, size and texture make you feel about this person?

Secondary

Why do you think Parekowhai portrayed Captain Cook to appear larger than life, yet captured the subject in a vulnerable moment? How do the reflections contribute to your overall experience of the work?
Home Front 2015

Cuisenaire (pronounced ‘kweezuhnair’) rods were invented by Belgian teacher Georges Cuisenaire. As a visual language, each rod colour and length represented a different unit of value. They were used in primary schools in Australia and New Zealand to teach children mathematics. In New Zealand, they are also used to teach Te Reo Māori (the Māori language). In Home Front 2015, the Cuisenaire rods are used as building blocks to make 4-metre-high and 23-metre-long walls that divide the gallery space into thirds. Although Parekowhai has worked with Cuisenaire rods in the past, using their rich colours and rectilinear shapes to create sculptures and walls, this is the first time he has used them to create the feeling of a home interior. Attached to one of the walls are two brightly coloured fibreglass rabbits, which belong to a different work, Two Drifters, Off to See the World 2011.

Acts III 2015

The different versions of Parekowhai’s ‘Acts’ refer to an action but also to the biblical book of Acts, and include all the tools needed to both evangelise and conquer. In the first version, the tools were presented randomly on the floor, while in the second, as if made in ready-to-use kit form, they refer to the children’s game of Jack Straws. The tools in the third work, Acts III 2015, are made from bronze and have been unpacked and strewn across the floor. Enveloped by a large, luminous forest, these are tools designed for building, whether wielded by colonists on arrival in a new country or presented as a symbol of humankind’s ongoing resourcefulness. Carving is a customary Māori practice, but Parekowhai leaves this work open to interpretation. It may equally be understood as reflecting on the traditions of his own ancestors, and as referencing the processes of colonisation.
The Horn of Africa 2006

In The Horn of Africa 2006, a New Zealand fur seal balances a grand piano on its nose. Black and glossy, the work is rich with filmic and literary references, including Jane Mander’s 1920 novel The Story of a New Zealand River, with the motif of the piano representing the ‘civilising force’ of European settlement. The Horn of Africa 2006 also refers to the complex historical, scientific and political events surrounding a war-torn stretch of contested African land believed to be the birthplace of humankind — a political hotbed, where conflicting claims of being ‘first’ loom large in the imagination. Parekowhai’s work can also be read as a comment on the precariousness of nationhood, with the sculpture recalling the shape of New Zealand’s North and South Islands.

Primary

In this sculpture, the seal is balancing the grand piano on the tip of his nose. Look at the way the seal is poised. Do you think the seal is relaxed or tense? Do you ever have to balance things in your life?

Secondary

How do the materials used and overall finish of the sculpture convey meaning? Annotate the artwork identifying the use of symbolism and metaphor.

Rules of the Game 2015

This massive neon work titled Rules of the Game 2015 shines brightly, like a commercial sign. It is the last artwork in the exhibition, which the viewer sees on exiting. Each letter is made up of a different font and colour and spells out the word ‘closed’. This sculpture blinks through each letter sequentially and then re-lights with only ‘lose’ left visible. To lose can mean many things: to misplace or forget something, to be deprived of something or someone, and to concede defeat. When we lose, we gain a new and sometimes painful awareness of who and what we are.

Primary

What two words can you see in this artwork? Think about how these words relate to the title.

Secondary

What makes this artwork effective? What game do you think Parekowhai is referring to? Are rules always fair?