



Foreground: Lonnie Hutchinson, **Comb** forms, 2009, steel and automotive paint, 98 x 110 cm each. **On the wall:** Lonnie Hutchinson, **Milk and honey**, 2012, builders' paper, metal pins, 300 x 300 cm each. Collection of the Chartwell Trust, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased 2012. Image: Courtesy of The Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt, New Zealand. Photograph: John Lake.

Recovering Historical Silences

The complex, questioning art of multi-media artist Lonnie Hutchinson deals with building identity, seminal experiences, community, history's development, and the powers that shape human actions and consequences. Hutchinson's works come alive through communication.

By Cassandra Fuso

Once defined by the dictates of patronage and official sanctions public art was in fact anything but public. As art critic and historian Arlene Raven stated in 1989, "Public art isn't a hero on a horse any more." At its most relevant, it raises issues that affect identity, and continue to do so. Much post-colonial art asserts this reflective freedom of expression.

Award-winning Auckland-based

Lonnie Hutchinson is a multi-media artist and teacher. She is of Sāmoan-Poutasi and Māori (Ngāi Tahu/Kai Tahu) descent. Her work engages with Māori and Polynesian art forms, architecture, aesthetics, and social and popular culture. She explores these through works in such media as steel and bitumen-saturated builders' paper. Her very public art addresses numerous questions of today. These are writ large in a substantial body of work commissioned by variety of public in-

stitutions in Aotearoa New Zealand and beyond. Such commissions not only confirm Hutchinson's homage to her several Pacific communities, but also a widespread recognition of her sustained cultural engagement.

In 2010, in anticipation of the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki revamp, Hutchinson was commissioned to make a "permanent and enduring work" in celebration of the building's development. The gallery, which originally

opened in 1888 in a distinguished French Renaissance-style edifice, is now internationally recognized as one of the Pacific's major repositories of art and artifacts. Her response to the gallery's brief was 12 laser-cut panels entitled *Honoa ki te Hono Tawhiti (To be connected to an ancient past)* (2011). *Kōwhaiwhai* patterns, emblematic of growth and connection, are the visual and symbolic language of these welcoming thresholds. Of deep spiritual significance, *kōwhaiwhai* patterns reference temporal and atemporal aspects of the Māori worldview—they are *more* than 'family trees.' But they are also assertions of presence. Rising up through the building, they reaffirm connection with the land (*wbenua*), its communities, their histories, and signal entry into spaces where traditional and contemporary artworks exist mutually. The reclamation and regenerative ethos essayed in *Honoa ki te Hono Tawhiti* is also apparent in several other public commissions: *All that you breathe* (2013), *Te Wabaroa ki te ao Mārama (Entrance to the World of Enlightenment)* (2013), and *I Like Your Form* (2014).

Te Wabaroa ki te ao Mārama, a freestanding steel *kōwhaiwhai*, celebrates past and present local communities and environs, branching up and toward Hamilton Lake and beyond, out over the Waikato, an area renowned as a source of food and shelter to Māori. As signaled by its title, material, scale, technology, and its specific site, this work speaks of cultural endurance and transformations. Like *Honoa ki te Hono Tawhiti*, it considers how environmental, cultural, social structures and spaces are constructed and altered; and how changes, both natural and fabricated, can impact upon our lives.¹

In the wake of the 2010 and 2011 Christchurch earthquakes, an ambulatory of gothic-style arches, entitled *Arcades*, was erected in the badly effected city center. Many greeted the six-meter-high structure as signaling renewal and forward movement. When Hutchinson's bright yellow, 50 meter-long *binaki* (eel trap) was installed beneath the arches, it aimed to enlarge the stricken community's sense of regeneration. Entitled *I Like Your Form* it reminded residents of the area's history of providing sustenance and particularly the role played by the Ōtākaro/Avon River in the local economy and culture of local Māori.

Recently Hutchinson's concern for cultural recuperation was acknowledged by a major retrospective: *Black Bird: Lonnie Hutchinson 1997–2013: A Survey*, curated by Professor Linda Tyler of the Gus Fisher Gallery, University of



Lonnie Hutchinson, *Honoa ki te Hono Tawhiti (To be connected to an ancient past)*, 2011, American oak, dimensions variable. Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, New Zealand. Collection Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki. Image: Courtesy of the Artist.

Auckland.² The exhibition brought together performance, installation, and animation works from the past 17 years of Hutchinson's practice, shown together for the first time.

Tyler comments that the works shown *en masse* bear witness to Hutchinson's unique historical and chronological progression, which she regards as significant and valuable. Tyler especially commends the artist's privileging of female experience from Indigenous and feminist perspectives and interrogation of the contingent effects of colonization.

Throughout these works rep-

etitions of Māori *kōwhaiwhai*, *koru*, and *kumara* vine motifs,³ Polynesian designs and forms of frangipani [Frangipani flowers symbolize shelter and protection], alternate with female and bird silhouettes to form interplays of space and shadows—cut from black builders' paper, a vapour-permeable sheathing membrane that is durable and cheap, more commonly associated with shelter than art. Hutchinson's choice of this material is telling and indicative of her privileging of invisible entities. The visual language of these works acknowledges Pacific women (past and present) and purposively celebrates their traditional arts of *siapo*,⁴ *tivaevae*,⁵ and weaving, as well as Missionary-introduced domestic needlework skills. Consistently, the work "casts a shadow, inviting us to untangle the history and meaning of the depiction of shadows as a technical and symbolic challenge in her art" [Tyler]. This challenge is magnified by the sheer scale and language of repetition in these works that demand our reconsideration of specific cultural motifs and their traditional signification.

Many Pacific cultural forms have suffered, and continue to do so, by cultural commodification and deracination. Aotearoa New Zealand, no less than many other colonized countries, including Samoa, still carry the shadow of Eurocentric appropriation and historical silences. Hutchinson's work, like that of several of her contemporaries, confronts what has been cast aside, including indigenous knowledge and female power.⁶

Waiting for Le Ma'oma'o (2012) and *Milk and honey* (2012) are signature examples of cultural reclamation. Cut from builders' paper—normally an interior and invisible membrane—these are symbolic works, paying homage to Hutchinson's Polynesian heritage and



Lonnie Hutchinson, *Honoa ki te Hono Tawhiti (To be connected to an ancient past)*, (detail), 2011, American oak, dimensions variable. Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, New Zealand. Collection Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki. Image: Courtesy of the Artist.

communities and probing the dire changes these have undergone and continuing.⁷ They reclaim woman as the matrix of female reproductive power. As Tyler comments, “[Hutchinson’s] art aims to restore and realize the splendor of an all-encompassing feminine nature, bringing it out of the shadows and into the light.”⁸

On a metaphorical level, what is excised here is as significant as the remaining tracery and its shadows. In the interplay of synecdoche, presence and absence, these forms reclaim what has been silenced or sanitized within the ‘civilizing’ dominant discourse.

While working with indigenous artists in Western Australia (who often referred to Hutchinson as ‘sista’/sister,) the artist became aware of the 19th century practice of ‘black birding,’ the trafficking of indigenous peoples, ‘Kanakas,’⁹ for slave labor on colonial plantations and the use of indigenous women as sex slaves on pearling ships.



Lonnie Hutchinson, *Te Waharoa ki te ao Mārama (Entrance to the World of Enlightenment)*, 2013, corten steel, 6 x 12 m. Hamilton Lake. Collection of the City of Hamilton. Photograph: Mark Hamilton.

In her study *Consuming Whiteness, Australian Racism and the ‘White Sugar’ Campaign*, Stefanie Affeldt states that while ‘black birding’ commonly referenced Kanakas working on sugarcane and cotton plantations in Australia, the term

also recalls a much wider connection to Pacific slavery on plantations in the late 19th century and that ‘blackbird’ was a slang term for local indigenous people. Affeldt suggests that the term might have derived from an earlier phrase, ‘blackbird shooting’, which referred to recreational hunting of Australian Aboriginal people by early European settlers.¹⁰

With a deceptively delicate touch, Hutchinson references these historic ‘black birds.’ She encapsulates their erasure in her own lace-like idiom as ‘black pearl’ and ‘black bird’ motifs, a naked female figure—in the negative. If, however, the figure appears anonymous and vulnerable—as in the white-and-red *Comb* (2009) works and *She could taste salt on her lips* (2015)—then in many more works, this female form, complete with a blazing Afro hairstyle, appears utterly indomitable—as in *Waiting for Le Ma’oma’o* and *Milk and honey*.

She could taste the salt on her lips (2015), initially, may appear to offer an evocative, dimensional, and auditory experience; veil-like, almost intimate. But, ultimately, this fold of repeated patterns, shadows, and sea sounds confronts us with the suffering of indigenous women.

The unwritten by-line for this and many other works might be: “Precisely what have you seen; exactly what do you understand?” And in this critical progress, our recognition and acknowledgement of these outlined identities and shadows is central—we are connected, part of the common coil and unfold of existence. What has been subjugated needs to be acknowledged and reclaimed.

Hutchinson’s red-and-white *Comb* (2009) works recollect items used by Pacific women. But just as veils of specific motifs draw attention to their silent shadows in endless repetition, in the *Comb* works, scale also prompts ques-



Lonnie Hutchinson, *All that you breathe*, 2013, cut vinyl, both works approx. 13.9 x 3.2 m. Two black vinyl murals commissioned for the Reading Room, Level 2 of the Kelburn Library, Victoria University, Wellington. Collection of Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand. Photographs: Victoria University of Wellington.

tions concerning exaggerations of the mundane.

These monumental combs are synecdoche works of reclamation and proclamation, critiques of control and erasure. Like the mantillas in the *Sista* compositions, their silent cavities and shadows metaphorically reword historical overlays and omissions in dominant narratives relating to Pacific women. How we respond to the knowledge embedded in these metaphors involves interpretation, which, in itself, is affected by the complex and yet often 'invisible' structures of knowledge, experience, and consciousness.

In a similar vein, *Sista Girl* (2004) recalls the hands behind Polynesian fiber arts. It is, nonetheless, also possible to construe the several *Sista* works as an array of redundant mantillas. Originally a secular Spanish garment, mantillas were worn in hot climates, draped over a hair comb and normally covering a woman's head and shoulders. Witness the numerous examples in female portraits by Goya. Since the 19th century, however, in Europe and its colonial outposts—and actively encouraged by the Catholic Church and its missionaries—mantillas have been converted into chapel veils. These were assigned symbolic significance and were endorsed as an external sign of the wearers' desire to humble themselves in the presence of God. In Hutchinson's *Sista* works, mantillas are restored to their secular function and beauty—but set aside, no longer covering indigenous heads or spiritual beliefs.



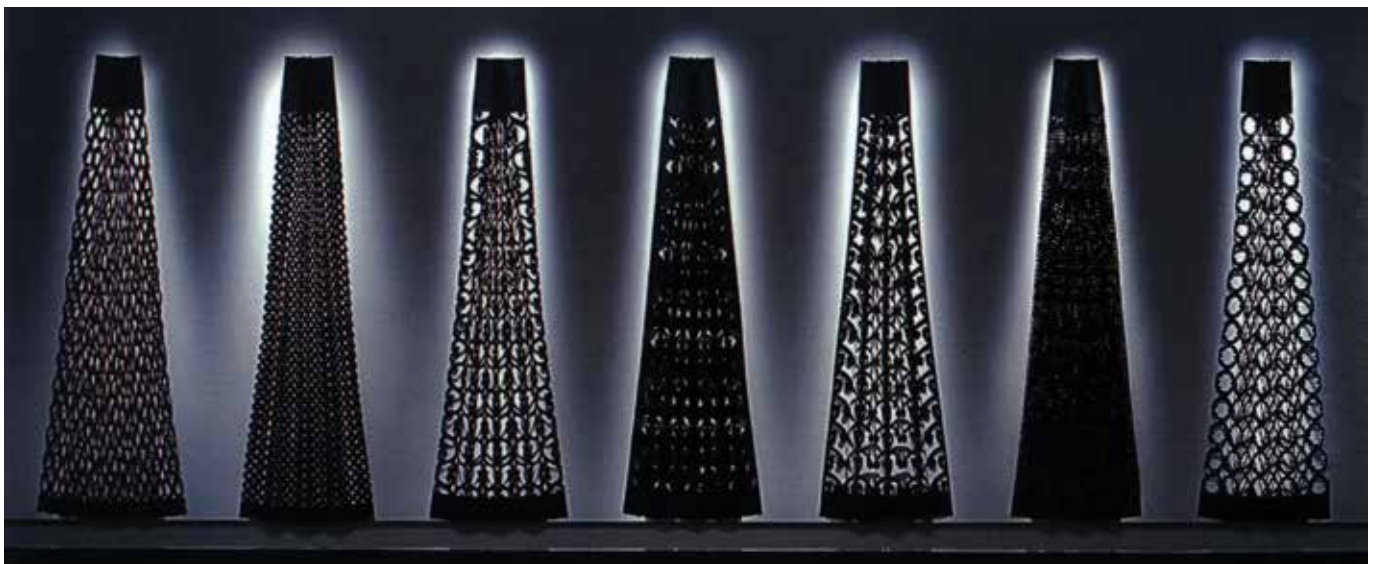
Lonnie Hutchinson, *Sista Girl*, 2004, builders' paper, metal pins, each panel approx. 100 x 60 cm. Image: Courtesy of the Artist. Photographs: Lightworkx.

Just as Hutchinson's use of incised voids and shadows of specific motifs is synecdochical, her palette is also restricted yet rich. As Hutchinson says: "I use red for its association with blood and blood lines; white for its association with beginnings and possibilities, and black because black is where *Te Korekore* (the nothingness) and *Te Pō* (the night) reside. These are not voids of fear or forsakenness, but rather the spaces where notions arise and transition from one form to another. Black is the space of infinite possibilities."

Here, then, is a dark work. Yet equally, it is luminous. "Wrapped in the bliss of black," public proclamations in a purpose-built, post-colonial idiom.¹¹ It articulates both historical continuity and critical engagement with some of the oldest, honored Pacific cultures, their *whakapapa* (genealogy), *tikanga* (customs), *taonga* (cultural treasures), and historical overlays. Their very contemporaneity is informed and conditioned by a sense of the ancestral past's immediacy and its assumed role in the future, continuously reinvigorating cultural identity.

This is surely the ethos embedded in *Honoa ki te Hono Tawhiti* [*To be connected to an ancient past*], one of Hutchinson's first major public commissions—threshold panels sited in The Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki. Their titles are worth reiterating: *Kia Ita* (*Be steadfast*); *Tupu te Maramatanga* (*Let understanding grow*); *Nau ka toro, ka toro* (*What you embrace is embraced*).

Lonnie Hutchinson's works,



Lonnie Hutchinson, *Sista Girl 7*, 2003, builders' paper, metal pins, each veil approx. 100 x 60 cm. 7 panels, each 250 x 10 mm. Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu. Photograph: Sam Hartnett, Gus Fisher Art Gallery, Auckland.

which are held in numerous private and public collections, explores the construction of identity and formative experiences in relation to communities and historical developments. They bring into public view and public discourse symbolic plays of substance and shadow in order to probe and question the powers that shape and affect human lives, actions and consequences. They persuade us of the need to acknowledge differences and recover historical silences. They counsel that symbols and the structures they represent only become meaningful through communication. But, as Hutchinson contends, crucial to this is a conscious apprehension of cultural differences and the acknowledgement that these are secondary to our shared humanity—the light and the dark. Δ

Notes:

1. The intimate relationship between Hutchinson's cultural and spiritual experience and enquiry was evident in her virtual environment *Beat the Feet* for the 2008 SCAPE Biennial, Christchurch. Positioned inside the Christchurch Cathedral and against this iconic colonial backdrop, the work invited critical consideration of human alterations to and overlays in the environment.
2. *Black Bird: Lonnie Hutchinson 1997–2013: A Survey* was at the Gus Fisher Gallery, University of Auckland (March 7–May 2, 2015) and at the Dowse Art Museum in Lower Hutt, Wellington, from August 21 until November 29, 2015.
3. *Koru* is the integral central motif of *kōwhaiwhai* designs used to depict genealogies in Māori *wbarenui* (meeting houses), in natural grounds of red, white, and black; commonly associated with the unfolding fern fronds and symbolizing new life, growth, strength, and peace. See: online encyclopedia *Tē Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*. New Zealand Ministry for Culture and Heritage/*Tē Manatū Taonga*.



Lonnie Hutchinson. Photograph: Jonathan Smart Gallery, Christchurch, New Zealand.

4. *Siapo* is both a decorative and symbolic art form in Samoan culture. Uses include clothing, bed covers, burial shrouds, and ceremonial garments.
5. In the Cook Islands and French Polynesia, *tivaevae* are quilts made by one woman, or created in groups of women called *vainetini*. *Tivaevae* (meaning 'patches') are highly symbolic fabrics, sometimes given on very special occasions either to important



Lonnie Hutchinson, I Like Your Form, 2014, Hinaki (eel trap), aluminium, fibreglass, nylon, and steel cabling, 50 meters. Image: Courtesy of the Artist. Photograph: Jo Mair.

visitors, or as birthday or wedding gifts. They are also used to cover the body of a deceased loved one.

6. Consider works by Robyn Kahukiwa (b.1940), Hariata Ropata Tangahoe (b. 1952), Emily Karaka (b.1952), Kura Te Waru Rewiri (b.1950), Diane Prince (b.1952), John Walsh (b.1954), Shane Cotton (b.1964), and Peter Robinson (b.1966). In these artists' works art and politics are fused to explore the complexities of cultural identity in Aotearoa New Zealand.
7. One of Hutchinson's most recent recuperative sculptures, *Star (Mound)* (2015), is located on Waiheke Island. It recalls the Samoan stone platforms known as *tia seu lupe*, pigeon-catching mounds. Within the pre-Christian Samoan belief system, it was believed that standing on elevated ground brought one closer to the heavens. These stone platforms, over 900 years old, were clearly of great spiritual significance.
8. Linda Tyler, 'Casting Shadows' in *Lonnie Hutchinson: Black Bird 1997–2013*. Gus Fisher Gallery, University of Auckland (2015) pp 25–29.
9. *Kanaka* is a Hawaiian word meaning 'human being.' It was originally used to mean a Hawaiian of Polynesian descent. When borrowed into English, it was used to refer to any Polynesian person and, in particular, to sugar plantation workers.
10. In the mid-1800s, ships scoured the eastern Pacific islands to fill labor shortages in Peru. See: *Consuming Whiteness. Australian Racism and the 'White Sugar' Campaign*. (Racism Analysis Studies 4 – 2014), Berlin.
11. I am indebted to poet Stephanie Oberg for use of this marvelous line from her poem about the artist Lonnie Hutchinson, 'Black Bird.'

Dr. Cassandra Fusco is the New Zealand contributing editor for World Sculpture News and Asian Art News. She is based in Christchurch.