



# CONVERSATION WITH A NONCONFORMIST

WORDS YVONNE VAN DONGEN PHOTOGRAPHS TESSA CHRISP





LESTER HALL IS AN ANTI-ART ARTIST. THAT'S ART WITH A CAPITAL A. HE CALLS HIS WORK POP ART, TAKING THE UPBEAT, OPTIMISTIC GRAPHICS OF KIWIANA AND GIVING THEM A DARKER UNDERCURRENT BY CONTRASTING MAORI AND PAKEHA SYMBOLS – HIS ATTEMPT TO START A CONVERSATION BETWEEN THE TWO





Ambush bidder on Trade Me and his decor is testament to his skill. Lester says the trick is to buy something no one else wants and then transform it. He's bought and repainted prison art, an old table, portholes, oars and che an old table, portholes, oars and chests of drawers that he's also partially covered in cowhide. sts of drawers that he's also partially covered in cowhide.



WHEN LESTER HALL SAYS he wants his art to stimulate a conversation between Maori and Pakeha, he means it. This man can talk to beat the band, make no mistake, and he's up for a verbal challenge. He's smart, articulate and imaginative and by juxtaposing recognized Maori symbols and art with cutesy Kiwiana, often in the shape of a stamp, he's hoping his work will open up discussion.

Maori are already there, he says, passionately debating the philosophical and cultural direction of the country, but Pakeha have been scared off. He would like nothing more than for Pakeha to come to the table and join in. It's not just a whimsical wish. His invitation is tinged with a sense of urgency because the way Lester sees it, we've never been further apart socially.

As if to underscore this, while *NZ Life & Leisure* talks to Lester at his home in Kerikeri a call comes in from a gallery in Auckland. They've had complaints about his depiction of Te Rauparaha. The complainants have promised to inform the descendants of the Maori chief. They question whether he has permission to use his image. All of which makes Lester laugh. Some descendants have already bought a painting based on the same image. Besides, it's a redundant argument as far as he's concerned. Many Maori appreciate that an image becomes more powerful, not less, every time someone uses it.

All the same, his work does get under some people's skin. Two women diners at an Auckland restaurant where his *Wahine* print is displayed complained that the word is derogatory. Art collector and patron Jenny Gibbs didn't like the portrayal of her with Maori activist Te Kaha. You can almost see Lester rubbing his hands together. Great. Marvellous. Bull's-eye. Now we're talking. This desire to open up communication is partly why his work is so colourful, accessible and affordable. It's also why he doesn't bother numbering his prints.







Ambush bidder on Trade Me and his decor is testament to his skill. Lester says the trick is to buy something no one else wants and then transform it. He's bought and repainted prison art, an old table, port-holes, oars and che an old











Ambush bidder on Trade Me and his decor is testament to his skill. Lester says the trick is to buy something no one else wants and then transform it. He's bought and repainted prison art, an old table, portholes, oars and che an old table, portholes, oars and chests of drawers that he's also partially covered in cowhide. sts of drawers that he's also partially covered in cowhide.

## CANNIBALISM, MAORI HEADS AND RUGBY

One of the most striking images in Lester Hall's home is his print of Sid Going (a Maori) with red hair, looking uncannily like Grant Batty (a Pakeha), dressed in a rugby jersey and a grass skirt, throwing a Maori head (moko makai). By playing around with the Pakeha/Maori images, Lester says the work plays with the difficulty we have in talking to each other. "It's about the game of Maori culture. Who owns it? Is it only Maori? Is it being taken from Maori? I think it's like rugby – a to-and-fro thing. The moko makai is there because I was studying it and came upon a New Zealand educational website which had chosen not to show photos of moko makai, which I find presumptuous. They were sold and traded and are part of European culture now. It's like cannibalism. I've been reading about that too. As far as I'm concerned, there's no shame in it. By trying to hide it people are creating a cloak of shame." Besides, he's not above a bit of blood himself. If Lester had his way he'd lop off the heads of Eric Watson, Michael Fay and David Richwhite. "Rich and powerful people should be frightened of the people, not the other way round," he grins. Now there's another conversation waiting to be had.

Lester says he can promise his buyers that he'll print on the best paper and ink money can buy and offers a satisfaction guarantee with online sales. And he'll always be doing new work. He wants his work to be excellent but not elite. He can't bring himself to call his work "Art" which he says is so often the preserve of the elite. His work is more Pop Art. "Popular art creates the possibility of change, cultural change, rather than a feeling of superiority because of the tail wagging the dog."

Lester's own journey towards art was anything but elite. Born into a large Wellington Catholic family which had little time for education, he left school and fell into a series of jobs while embarking on a life of drinking and partying in Wellington and later Auckland. This lasted until his mid-30s when he stopped drinking altogether and moved up north, running away from the city Auckland had become. He cites the appalling construction of the Aotea centre, the Metrowater debacle and \$40 parking fines as the catalysts for the move.

He chose the most remote area of the Bay of Islands since he'd enjoyed holidaying there and later moved to an area near Kerikeri. So far, no regrets. "It's got decent people, is beautiful physically and there's enough of everything here to be fun without being big and citified." Lester lives on his own, enjoying his own company and the freedom to do exactly as he pleases. One of his favourite freedoms is sailing solo. Since moving north it's become a passion and he now counts that and making art as his two most-loved activities. ~









He's had more than 20 beach cats in his time but now owns a little beach catamaran he's modified to sail more efficiently. He enjoys the mental agility that comes from factoring in wind, weather, currents, man and boat. "Sailing for me is a spiritual experience. I don't want to fish or go to an island. I just don't want to miss out on the puffs of wind and different states of water. Also sailing is about taking a risk and I believe people should be able to take risks."

For the first 10 years Lester sailed almost exclusively, stopping only to make the occasional artwork. In the last year he has been more of a land dweller, decorating his rented dwelling with art and embellishments – something his friends call "Lesterfication". He's also given his own work his full attention, investing in a top-shelf printer and devising a process whereby he paints an image and then renders it again on computer. His house isn't large but it manages to accommodate five computers and three televisions. He's also an ardent ambush bidder on Trade Me and his décor is testament to his skill. Lester says the trick is to buy something no one else wants and then transform it. He's bought and repainted prison art, an old table, portholes, oars and chests of drawers that he's also partially covered in cowhide.

He wonders why Maori carving hasn't become part of our folk art and isn't used in our interior design. "Painted Maori carvings could be used to make gorgeous kitchens. Or what about a ridge pole in the middle of a house? It would be superb." Among the questions Lester finds himself frequently asking are: "Who says we can't employ this art form? Who says it has to be spiritual? In fact isn't what you include in your home a spiritual choice? Are you saying it has to be spiritual because you want to keep it in your little realm so only you can make decisions about it and make money from doing that? It's the same as Christians saying we can't have the Virgin-in-a-condom artwork."

On the other hand, if Lester Hall ruled New Zealand he'd make learning Maori compulsory. "Maori and Pakeha need to want the best for each other. We don't need to know everything but we need to feel safe. But Pakeha do need to be educated and think about the society they want. The only people I piss off are the ones at either end of the spectrum, the ones who have a diatribe ready to go and who don't think past their prejudice, fear and anger."

All these thoughts have gelled for Lester only in the last two or three years and his work is the richer for it. He's revelling in the way his ideas have reverberated with the public. "The exciting thing for me is that people like my art and have a conversation about being a Kiwi. It's very cool. I love it. It's like thinking in a room by yourself for years and years and suddenly some people hear you."

See more of Lester's work on [www.lesterhall.com](http://www.lesterhall.com)





Ambush bidder on Trade Me and his decor is testament to his skill. Lester says the trick is to buy something no one else wants and then transform it. He's bought and repainted prison art, an old table, portholes, oars and chests of drawers that he's also partially covered in cowhide.



"IT'S LIKE THINKING IN A ROOM BY YOURSELF FOR YEARS AND YEARS AND SUDDENLY SOME PEOPLE HEAR YOU"

