

LESTER HALL painting in his Waipiro Bay living room, photo by Dean Wright.



Coming out of the White living room

Artist provocateur Lester Hall talks to Natacha Chossudovsky about waking up to the myths of this nation's history.

It's a beautiful day in Russell. One of those days that will have you convinced that you are in a timeless paradise of the South Pacific. After a windy journey down to Waipiro bay, I knock on Lester Hall's door. He greets me grandly, paintbrush in hand, like a dishevelled Jack Nicholson peering through a pair of trendy goggle-like glasses. As he guides me into his living room, one glimpse of Lester's pink pirate skull pyjama bottoms confirms that, for this eccentric salty dog, the history of the Bay of Islands is most vividly alive.

The history of this nation first really came to life for Hall accidentally, when he landed a job as installation technician at the Māori ward of the Auckland War Memorial Museum back in the mid-eighties. Until then, Hall was brought up on white middle-class interpretations of New Zealand's colonial history and recalls his world "wobbling" at the young age of six, when he overheard his parents discussing a news item in the kitchen – Māori thought that Pākehā shouldn't be in New Zealand. "I was really shocked," he recalls, "that people in my country thought that I shouldn't be in my country. It didn't seem fair." And considering his surroundings, Lester was in no way equipped to make sense of the Māori perspective on the matter.

Years later at the Auckland Museum, Lester was privileged to handle and closely study pre-European Māori objects as part of his everyday job. The sophistication of these artefacts hit him like a slab of greenstone. He realized that all the ideas he had heard in school or through the media – that the conversations animating this nation's white living rooms – were in effect severely limited and far removed from reality.

Lester was among many, in the 1980s, to recognise that the cultures of this land – whether Māori, dealing with the outcomes of colonialism, or white New Zealanders no longer clinging to the skirts of Mother England – had undergone some deep and irrevocable transformations. There was also a growing understanding that the changes and events of this country's history had churned out an interconnected, if not united, culture.

Interestingly, almost 30 years later and nestled in the country's first colonial outpost, Lester Hall seems to think that much of the old racist mythology is still very much alive in the New Zealand collective consciousness. The enduring misinterpretations between both cultures fascinate him.

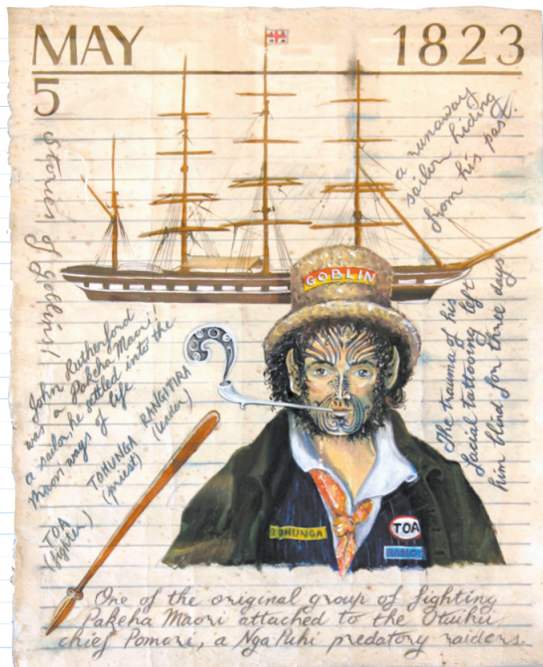
Hall's *Hoaries* and *Whities* series mimics the spirit of European and Māori encounters through history and convey the misrepresentations of Māori by Europeans as a matter of fact. The first painting of the series replicates the racist assertion that "Hone Heke was a tattooed savage! Pass it on.... - signed *Whitie*." According to Hall, this is a common Pākehā view which



[Dia de los Muertos TIKI]

[61]

[visual arts]



[Goblin]



[Tatawed Sailor]

demonstrates how the Māori practice of utu is not properly understood as rectifying what is seen as an imbalance – instead being grossly labelled as revenge. And about Māori activist Mike Smith chopping down the tree at One Tree Hill, he adds, "most Pākehā people are really pissed off about the tree at One Tree Hill. I thought it was an excellent act of defiance. Who gives a shit? It's a tree, not two kids being blown up at a bus stop!"

Of the spiritual lessons deeply rooted in Māori culture, tangata whenua is also frequently misconstrued as pertaining exclusively to indigenous people. Tangata whenua is a universal concept which signifies that we as human beings are intrinsically part of the land. Attempting to protect the environment to safeguard resources is just a surface-level reaction to our planet's state of ecological turmoil. "We exist because of the land," explains Hall. "And actually, it's part of us and spiritually we lose if we disrespect it. But the people who buy land, own land, sell land – they don't want to hear we are part of the land, and they see it as a stupid concept and a low brow grab at free stuff."

Hall himself does not stop at becoming a part of the whenua – he also considers that white New Zealanders should use their own tribal appellation in order to truly become part of the Māori history of Aotearoa. He symbolises this belief through a series of works called Ngāti Pākehā in which he depicts tiki that celebrate the fertility of this country's ethnic mix and humorously brings forth "the serious message that we are all one." By calling himself Ngāti Pākehā, Hall feels he has a place to speak from which is one of common ground with Māori, looking towards a shared future of positive change.

There is no doubt that Lester Hall is a controversial figure whose statements often scorch the ears of even the more moderate among us. But to him, shocking peoples' sensibilities is what it's all about. "The old horseshit myths of popular New Zealand history need to be aired and flung out as silly and not realistic," declares Hall. Although deep down his subject matter is grave, Lester Hall is optimistic and his work seeks to establish a viable middle ground to find positive and sensible outcomes for all New Zealanders. As the focus shifts off of the worn-out interpretations of our past, honest and intelligent conversations emerge. 🐟

Tangata whenua is a universal concept which signifies that we as human beings are intrinsically part of the land.



[Wahoo]



[Tiki 17]



[detail from Kiwiana]