

RALPH HOTERE*Requiem*

1974

As a Māori-Australian artist and academic, I have an uneasy relationship with modernism and modernist art. Modernist's insistence of the rejection of old ways seems at odds with their apparent borrowing of imagery and motifs from customary arts from across the globe. Think here of Pablo Picasso's 1907 painting, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, where he famously borrowed motifs from African masks (without consideration of context), to represent prostitutes. As a person of colour, it is hard to ignore the blatant racism embedded in this act of appropriation. The story of modernism goes hand-in-hand with imperialism, industrialisation, colonialization, and the devastating consequences to whenua/country that has caused the current ecological emergency of climate change. In other words, Modernism, makes me wary.

Where then, does the art movement begun in the 1960s in Aotearoa (New Zealand) and now referred to as "Māori Modernism", or the artists known as "Māori Internationals", fit into this picture? How do I begin to read the works of Māori modernist, **Ralph Hotere** (Te Aupōuri and Te Rarawa; 1931–2013)? He has been described as one of Aotearoa's most significant modern artists and his art practice was a bridge between Māoridom and contemporary art.

Hotere's legacy is one of which I am a direct benefactor as he opened the way for Māori artists to work with mediums and techniques not normally associated with Māori art. For Hotere, it appears that modernism provided a way of escaping pigeonholing and the limiting boundaries of labels such as Māori, or Māori-artist. As quoted in **Jonathan Mane-Wheoki's** *Contemporary Maori art – ngā toi hou - Te toi hou a te Maori, te toi taketake a te Māori: Question of Identity*, in 1976 Hotere said "I am Māori by birth and upbringing. As far as my work is concerned this is coincidental." He was known for being silent

about the meaning, form, and content of his work, instead wanting his works to stand alone. In 1973 he said, "No object, and certainly no painting, is seen in the same way by everyone, yet most people want an unmistakable meaning which is accessible to all in a work of art. It is the spectator which provides the change and meaning in these works."

I have lost time staring at Hotere's painting, *Requiem*, 1974 trying to find a way in; an access point. This work is both contradictory and enigmatic, much like its maker. On the surface of it I see the precision of his thin red and black vertical lines partially clouded by a contradictory expressionist square that obscures and distorts like a fogged-up window. Or is it a kākahu (a Māori cloak)? A kahu huruhuru (type of kākahu), made from feathers of manu (birds) such as kiwi? Or a hieke (rain cape), woven from muka (New Zealand flax fibre) and harakeke (New Zealand flax) tags? The vertical lines in *Requiem* echo the construction of Māori cloak weaving with its vertical foundation warps. Or are these vertical lines the humming of sound? The Catholic Mass to remember the souls of the dead. Is this the requiem to which the title refers? Whose dead are being remembered here?

Black dominates this work; appearing behind, in front, and in the in-between spaces to reveal the varied forms of darkness – the depth and variety of the void. This rich blackness that would become Hotere's signature, reads to my eyes, as particularly Māori. Hotere's black is not an emptiness or redaction but instead evokes Māori creation stories that begin with Te Pō (the darkness, the night or the underworld) and then follow with Te Kore, or the realm of potential being (the void) before light is let into the world. I can imagine arguing with Hotere over this point. But then, I am the spectator here.

Dr Kirsten Lyttle

Ralph Hotere, *Requiem*, 1974. Oil, cellulose lacquer and gold paint on cotton canvas, 81.5 x 81.5cm.
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