

## Nurture – Nigel Brown

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In 1977, I was struck by a painting, bought by the family art collectors, the likes of which I hadn't seen before. Painted by Nigel Brown, it featured a single lemon on a rather ragged, tenacious tree, tended by a man clad in a black singlet. That item of clothing made him instantly recognizable as 'one of us', a man in his backyard, working in a factory, or on the land. It was the kind of thing that John Clarke wore on television at the time, along with his gumboots, as 'Fred Dagg.' That universal, vernacular (New Zealand) man was quite familiar to me. But why was he bent over that tree, showing so much concern? Words framed the image, enigmatic, poetic, bold. I was drawn to the lemon, the man, and the text, declaring the lemon a ray of hope, a 'bright sun for us all'. Yes, I had looked at McCahon's work and others featuring text as well as images, but this was something different. McCahon's figurative painting was intimidating, for me. His religious iconography was scary, larger than me, too big to contemplate, too large to be part of my world, an unbeliever. But the Lemon Tree was close, accessible, domesticated, something familiar that I could understand. This had meaning.

Nearly forty years later, I can still look at that same painting and ponder that single lemon, shining brightly on a tree, perhaps the hope and inspiration of the black-singleted bloke who gazes at it. No doubt he had nurtured that single fruit of the tree, willing its survival, tending its needs. This straggling, leafless lemon tree was not alone, but one of a series painted over a year that ended with its death. At least it had produced that single fruit, any bitterness hidden within.

Brown began life on the Crown Terrace, high in the Crown Range in Central Otago, where he spent his early years on his parents' small farm. His forefathers mined parts of Central Otago for gold, transforming that natural landscape into a humanly modified one. Perhaps the artist's engagement with the landscape and humanity began with this awareness of his family history. As a teenager in Tauranga, Brown's vision and imagination was formed by the world around him – again, the landscape, the Māori world of the marae, the family orchard, the wooden cases used to pack the fruit on his parents' orchard, the people in this world, his family – and the poetry, the words his father wrote, inspiring Brown's use of text around his images. It was there as a teenager that Brown saw the reflection of the mushroom-shaped explosion of a nuclear bomb in the night sky, shaping his awareness of the curse of war. Fred Graham, his art teacher at secondary school, recognised Brown's early artistic vision and helped to encourage that.

Nigel Brown's paintings have intrigued me since the impact of that first viewing of his work. Brown once described himself as an 'infiltrator', someone who viewed suburbia from the inside with a cynical, critical edge (O'Brien 1991: 15). Over the decades the role of that Black Singlet Man has morphed, as he tangled with suburbia, mowing lawns, subduing or coming to terms with the urban setting, marriage, tending his children. Did that lemon, seen 'through windows

remotely', signify an aspiration to move beyond the domestic out into the landscape, to engage with and nurture the wider environment? In the suburban context and beyond this, in the natural world, Brown's work is concerned with people, with 'humanity and land', or the 'struggle between these two'; his 'Everyman' or Singlet Man is a self-portrait of a kind, extended to generalize the human situation (O'Brien 1991: 19). Brown unearths the archaeology of the archetypes and iconography of Aotearoa, a bicultural nation. This includes the icons of Christianity and New Zealand art and politics: the wharehau and marae, the cross, the ark, the tree of life ('Life Tree'), or the tree of Genesis, water, as a taonga, a purifying and pure source; the symbols of peace, of hope, the human within a living landscape. He is concerned with the politics of environmentalism and the natural world.

The thing that most got Brown 'going' as a painter in the early 1970s, he has said, was the single, brutal cut of a driveway through a Titirangi bank of clay, exposing its raw yellow earth, tearing through 'nature'. The 'Axeman' was at work, creating or subduing the surrounding context, forming his own environment and unforming the natural world around him. Singlet Man embodies the conflict between the landscape and the human world; he wields not only axes, but also other tools – spades, or saws, or brooms, suspended in the role of agency. But, he can nurture as well as destroy – the human choice. This was the same Axeman who nurtured that lemon tree. This creates a world that could be binary; male and female; dog and human; nature and human. But Brown gives humanity a role, overcoming these oppositions:

'The black singlet man and woman become the essential human element to complete the belonging story. I don't want to see birds as separate from us so I exaggerate the intimacy. I want the now to link to the past and organic nature. I want ancestors to come alive with contemporary relevance. I want the belonging to be a pulsation and a continuum' (<http://nigelbrown.co.nz/journal/>).

Brown's figurative painting of that lemon tree and singlet man, framed with poetry, created his signature style that is seen again here. In 'Nurture' the Axeman and Axewoman have undergone a transformation, morphing further from those early days of the 1970s when they displayed an ambiguity about the place they occupied in the world – were they for or against 'nature'? Were they controlling nature or part of it, or both? Now, forty years later, the Axeman / Everyman and Axewoman / Everywoman appear unambiguously in nature, part of nature, caring for nature. The axe, the lawnmower, the saw, have all gone. In their place, the man and the woman hold native birds, shellfish, shells, the seeds of trees, and they embrace each other warmly. They display a resolution to the conflict of earlier decades when the man was unsure of, or still exploring, his place in the world.

The centrepiece of this exhibition, 'Concerning Our Earth Nurturing', spells out the theme of these paintings and Brown's current focus, a point he has reached through the decades of his work. This painting repeats earlier themes of women, men, and the 'living landscape' of Aotearoa, but the message has grown bigger, stronger. The brilliant blue pukeko is centre stage, flanked by kererū, the white-

chedsted wood pigeon, and held by the Axeman, transformed into a more sensate being. He is now aware of his emotions, his aroha for all things, now understands his role in nature, caring for native birds, symbolizing Aotearoa, the earth and the natural environment. Behind Axeman, there is Woman, looking outwards, upwards, and displaying her own strength. In the background, Brown's 'Life Tree', the figurative ponga form, stands, its shape recalling the cross in McCahon's work, and indeed, there on a branch again are the three crosses of Christianity. In this image, Brown has excavated his own iconography of the 1980s, as well as that of McCahon. Brown repeats his symbolic ponga tree, grown larger; a clear blue waterway runs down the left of the image (recalling our water and rivers, the source of life itself, currently under threat from pollution); behind them all are the maihi, the brown barge boards of the wharenuī, the meeting house or marae, with a carved ancestor figure glaring from the top. This is indeed Aotearoa, and who else but Brown could have excavated and created these archetypal figures of our collective, and bicultural, psyche. The swirling border confirms this context: these are pītau, the spirals of whakairo, the carved decoration relating to forms of nature such as the unfolding ponga frond, the beginning of life, sometimes recalling ancestor figures in the Māori world. Brown depicts the world of Pākehā and Māori, the world he inhabits and sees, where he has uncovered ancestors and spirits in nature born here, embedded in this earth and its tree and life forms, a world of both Māori and Pākehā iconography. Not for him the formalist world of English or Celtic art and symbolism.

The 'Nurture' paintings are executed in an accumulative and intuitive dot form, a method that is neither 'pointillist', nor executed in style of Australian Aboriginal art, although at first glance it may evoke these. Brown himself refers to this method as a 'star cluster technique'. The text itself is further framed in dots, the artist referencing an indigenous world where traditional practices promise that nature may be properly cared for. The wording of the text is specific, using Māori as well as Linnaean binomial names for species. 'Arcadia with Kiwis' however has neither text nor dot framing. It presents an idealized, harmonious picture: three women sit on the ground, surrounded by kiwi, pukeko, kererū, ruru (morepork) and other birds. Behind the women a man plays perhaps the recorder, creating a harmony with nature, both fauna and flora, while in the background, behind the ponga, three volcanoes send their fire into the sky. The moa and the arrangement of people in an 'exaggerated' intimacy with birds reveals the 'now' linking to the 'past' in an 'organic nature', as Brown has stated, above – an arcadian, utopian vision, but one we should aspire to nonetheless.

Although Brown once stated that he didn't paint the kauri (one of McCahon's iconic trees), in 'Nurture' this finally appears; 'KAURI', 'Bloody Big', he says. The singlet on the man is blue, (as is the clothing on the figure behind him), as he holds (nurtures) the seed of this giant, now under threat from disease. Brown also pays homage to the humble mangrove, so important for cleaning sediment from salt water and estuaries, but often belittled or eradicated by those who are so ignorant of its important role in the environment. 'Animal Vegetable Mineral Birds of a Feather' proclaims the artist – of course, we must 'stick together' and humans must 'Aroha [love the] Environment'. What message could be more simply spelled out? This includes not only the life forms of our own country, but

all those threatened species, the elephant, rhinoceros, the moa, already long lost, the kiwi, and of course even humanity itself, including the child in the corner of the painting, under threat from environmental and climate change.

There are fish, as well as the huhu beetle, the tuatara and the endangered Hamilton's frog, our forgotten or unknown taonga, treasures. The patiki, or flounder, leaps off the singlet man's hands, as the painting itself appears to leap out of its background. The two humans are surrounded by the blue sea, the source of marine life and food. 'BIOSPHERE CRISIS Pretty Bloody Pictures Won't Do It Any More' shouts out the artist in another painting, as he continues with his role of social and political critic, regardless of the futility of doing this – echoing the helplessness many humans may feel in the face of this crisis, but making me smile or even laugh. In this image, 'Woman' embraces the man in the singlet, who in turn embraces kiwi, watched by the kererū, tuatara and fantail, that same bird of the Maui story. Hills unfold behind them and 'life trees' abound.

'PĪWAKAWAKA' or 'Fantail' forefronts Woman, an earthy, full, nurturing figure now, with Singlet Man behind her. Pīwakawaka surround her, 'no harm in idle chatter', while three 'life trees' on the hilltop evoke the three crosses, again, and the wharenuī of the marae, the indigenous world, stands close by. In 'TOUTOUWAI', ('NZ Robin') the positions of the humans are reversed, with Singlet Man in the foreground; we are told this small bird is 'highly confiding', suggesting its intimacy with people, its closeness. The beautiful 'KEA' shows off the red colours of its underwing, poised against a mountain. It is 'Just Curious', the characteristic it is best known for, 'Seeking Higher Places'. (Some have seen this as a pest and tried to eradicate it.) 'KAORIKI', the Little Bittern, however, now only walks 'The Lagoon of the Mind'; it is extinct, last seen alive in the 1890s. Some extinct birds, such as 'HUIA', are better known, in this case for its tail feathers, while others here are rare, endangered species found now only in their specific habitats: 'WHIO' (the blue duck); the elegant, stately 'KŌTUKU' (white heron); 'KĀKĀRIKI'; 'APTERIX AUSTRALIS' and 'OWENII HASTII', three of the five species of kiwi; 'TĪEKE' and 'TUI'. 'PUA-O-TE-REINGA' (translated as the 'flower of the underworld' as the flower emerges directly from below ground) or 'Dactylanthus' is a small, inconspicuous brown plant, another species under serious threat as its habitat declines.

Te Kōngahu Museum of Waitangi is the perfect site for Nigel Brown's 'Nurture' exhibition: it is the birthplace of our nation, the sacred site where Te Tiriti o Waitangi was signed, where the relationship between Māori and Pākehā was first, and is still, acknowledged and nurtured. 'Te kōngahu', in Ngāpuhi dialect, is the unborn child, the child in need of nurture; the 'baby' is the museum (Caitlin pers. comm. 24/8/2017), and its potential for nurturing a new relationship between Māori and Pākehā, forging a new Aotearoa. The 'Nurture' paintings recall and relate to this same relationship, expressing it in terms of the natural and cultural world around us, seen at Waitangi itself, where the Whare Runanga, the carved meeting house (the House of Assembly), built in 1940 to symbolize the relationship between Māori and the British Crown, stands alongside the Treaty House; the pukeko wander and the kererū and pīwakawaka swoop and

flit, and the water of the Waitangi River runs into Pēwhairangi, the Bay of Islands.