



Fiona Pardington



Portrait of a life-cast of Pitani, Solomon Islands 2009 (front), (back) & (profile)

pigment inks on Hahnemuhle Photo Rag
Courtesy of the Auckland War Memorial Museum

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*Ahua: A beautiful hesitation*¹

In 1837 when the French explorer Dumont d'Urville set sail for the Pacific he took with him the phrenologist and cast-maker Alexandre Dumoutier. The 50 life casts made by Dumoutier during the voyage are now in the collection of the Musée de l'Homme in Paris (one of the museums that form the Musée National d'Histoire Naturelle). There are also copies of some of these casts in the collection of the Auckland War Memorial Museum.

Those that agreed to the arduous process of having a cast made included not only Maori chiefs and literary and musical figures such as Franz Liszt and Honoré de Balzac but also many unknown young men from villages in the Pacific. Dumoutier was motivated to make these casts by his belief in the science of phrenology, which attempted to determine an individual's personality and abilities from the configuration of their skull.

Fiona Pardington's exquisitely realised portraits of the casts show the living presence of the sitter in the tautness of skin and muscle tone and the finely replicated details of facial features. The delicate outlines of eyelashes pressed firmly together are the only clue to the claustrophobia of the moment as plaster of Paris was used to encase the head and neck. Although the sitter could still breathe through straws placed in the nostrils, in a sense these casts have recorded a death as much as they have a life. There is an expression in Maori that captures that moment of death in life 'Ko o matou nei kanohi ko nga urupa o ratou kua wehe atu ki te po/Our faces are the living graves of our ancestors who have departed into the night.'²

*The language of skulls*³

In the nineteenth century the pseudoscience of phrenology was widely accepted. Its founding practitioner was the German physiologist Franz Joseph Gall and while it was taken seriously and taught in academic institutions in Europe it was eventually discredited. For a time it rivalled astrology in popularity in the salons of France and Victorian England. There were many pedagogical busts produced to cater for this interest: some were mass-produced, idealised sculptures while others are life-casts. As objects they are both grotesque and beautiful at the same time. Many of the busts are almost jewel like in their detail with numbers and inscriptions on tiny fragments of paper glued to the surface like traces of human thought written across the contours of the skull.

An interview

Fiona Pardington with Kriselle Baker, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, May 13, 2010

Can you talk first about how the project began.

It was Tahu Potiki who first mentioned to me that there were casts of two Ngai Tahu chiefs in France, Piuraki and Tangatahara. Later I asked Yves (Yves le Fur, Director of Collections, Musée du Quai Branly) when I was in Paris. He said there was a show at the Musée d'Orsay in 2002 (*A Fleur de Peau*) and he later sent me the catalogue.

Roland Barthes begins his book *Camera Lucida* with a wonderful musing on a photograph of Napoleon's brother where he talks about realising with amazement that he was looking into eyes that had looked at the Emperor. When you began this project was it the idea of looking into the past in this way that inspired you?

It is pretty much that same kind of relay that interests me. Tangatahara and Piuraki were actually in direct contact with great, great, great grandparents of mine and I find all of those relationships extremely compelling.

One of the most interesting things for me is the real sense of the presence of the person.

Yes, what I was trying to find were the faces of the living people presenting and manifesting in the object. For Maori that happened very directly, that people were drawn down into their likeness.

There is an aspect of metaphysical philosophy that talks about being able to access the core of objects, what can be known about objects and what our relationship to objects are. Its about describing and this kind of infinite regress and whether there is a final meaning behind all the veils of representation and if there is where is it situated.

Do you think Maori have an individualised sense of the core of objects? Of these portraits?

My understanding is that Maori would say that the ancestors are inhabiting the ahua (life-cast) and that the ancestor had come from behind the greenstone veil and that they are here all the time its just that we can't see them – in fact there's not a great deal of separation between the living and the dead.

Yves Lomax, whom I know you've been reading quite a lot of recently, talks about time interrupting itself – is that where 'a beautiful hesitation' came from?

No it was something I was thinking about last year but I put it aside because I thought it was too pretty but in fact it was perfect. Its that tension between the idea of trying to fix intense moments of meaning or personal experiences, whatever those intense moments might be, and how people try to extend that into some universal significance or a necessary entity in the sense of god or spiritual entity. For me there's a certain kind of loss or mourning associated with that because we can't keep anything, because it doesn't matter how beautiful or how horrible it is nothing will last. All living memory is exhausted and in the end it all passes away. That's what's so nice about other people we're all equally swallowed up by time, by the inevitable process, there's nothing in the world that can stop that. So when you look in the face of any of those people (the portraits), or my experience of looking in the face of my new born baby, its like the world's never been without them. So each of those people, each 'hesitation' is a beautiful sovereign territory.

How do you think this body of work relates to, or is different from, your previous work?

It's a bit tougher really. For some reason I needed to go and be beautiful for quite a while and I think a lot of people were dismayed and gave up on me but I think I couldn't have done this work until I had gone as far as I could into a more beautiful place. I don't see beauty as unchallenging but it has been a deeply unfashionable place for a long time. You know all of that stuff is so deathly. It is only so stupendously beautiful because it rots and falls away, its like that rose with the worm in the centre that type of thing. Its impending doom – what could be more deathly than a beautiful face? It only makes it even more beautiful.

So you see these works as a harsher reality?

Well yes, there have been two core practices within my work, the beautiful hei tiki and huia represent the purest expression and before that the medical and psycho sexual images and now I've managed to integrate those two strands. So this is the first example of that blended aesthetic and those ideas functioning together and that comes from lots of research and years of reading in psycho-analytical areas and philosophy trying to get a grasp on classical metaphysics, the empirical and the transcendental – it's equally revelatory and bewildering at times. And then there's just life experience and being a mother and maturity.

In this show there are images of Maori, Pacific people and Europeans – do you think they were attempting to look at everyone in the same way?

I think the motivations for those casts was so widely different that its really important not to try to generalise too much. Initially I was going that's great but in fact it wasn't all about them (the French) being egalitarian and lets look at us and look at them – though you could extrapolate that from it.

Lets talk a little about *The Language of skulls*. You said at some stage that you thought it was 'the last attempt by man to drag the universe back to a man-centred world'.

I'm sure I read something in relation to that. Certainly there was a lot of activity – it was the last gasps really. I think it had a lot to do with the sudden realisation that the sun wasn't revolving around the earth and it was all down hill from there. I look at that kind of activity (phrenology) for that time, it was so retrograde, that ignorance.

With the phrenology heads when you're looking at those are you thinking of them as objects?

Yes mainly as objects. What's fascinating is all the activity of thought inscribed across the surface of them and that whole idea of topographically knowing and then the colours and all the different lines. Some of them are life-casts and some death-casts. They become these incredible sculptural objects that shift between being really monstrous, like a zombie coming alive from the dead, and quite beautiful. For me there's a really creepy see-sawing between the two. When I first saw the bust that has the small round patches and pieces of discoloured paper still attached I was quite horrified because it seemed such a monstrous object. And yet that turned out to be, under all that scratching, imposing and revising. I fancy he may have been a very sincere phrenologist or one of his friends maybe. And then there are the lovely gold busts even though they're falling to pieces, they seem like vexed angels. You know the paint falling off is quite morbid and resolutely corporeal and the finger prints and smudges and chips, smears and layers of dust and of course the surfaces are beautiful they're so painterly.

This bust has the word penetration written on it and it's that whole idea of the mind trying to penetrate through. The not knowing and these attempts to somehow try to know everything. Maori have such a positive and profound engagement with things unknown and things unseen and I think in Western thought there is a lot to be learned from that. For me the tension in the phrenology is this drive to know stuff and the need to make all these preposterous pronouncements, always trying to lock it down.

Which destroys it in a way.

Yes its pretence. Its like shouting into the wind.

Curator Dr Kriselle Baker, Associate curator Megan Tamati Quennell

Works from the series Ahua: a beautiful hesitation are currently being exhibited as part of the 17th Biennale of Sydney, *The Beauty of Distance: Songs of survival in a precarious age*.

Thank you to Creative New Zealand, The Todd Trust and The ART50 Trust for their generous support.

¹ Ahua (noun) shape, appearance, likeness, character; ahua (verb) to form, make

² From: Conversations and email communications between Matiu Baker and Paul McNamara concerning the relevance of the photograph within Maoridom, 24.03.06.

³ *The language of skulls/Le langage des cranes* is the title of a book by Marc Renneville (*Le langage des cranes: un histoire de la phrénology*, Institut d'édition Sanofi-Synthélab, Paris, 2000).

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Portrait of a life-cast of Pierre-Marie Alexandre Dumoutier (profile & front) 2010

Pigment inks on Hahnemuhle Photo Rag

Courtesy of the Musée de l'Homme (Musée National d'Histoire Naturelle), Paris