

New Zealand Art

by Joyce M. Youmans

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New Zealand is widely known for its diverse artistic production, which includes work by painters, filmmakers, dancers, and singers. For at least the past two centuries, many gay and lesbian artists have hailed from this small group of islands that lies just off the southeastern coast of Australia.

Frances Hodgkins

Perhaps the most famous bisexual New Zealand artist is the painter Frances Hodgkins (1869-1947), who trained as a watercolorist on the islands in the late nineteenth century. She spent most of her adult life in England and, by the end of her career, was regarded as one of the leading artists of the British modern movement.

Hodgkins lived for some time with a woman, never married, and warned her female students about the difficulty of combining marriage and motherhood with an artistic career.

Two self-portraits created during the 1930s illustrate her rejection of the conventional female role. Both self-portraits conflate the genre of self-representation with that of still life, wittily challenging the parameters of both. The still-life objects function as metaphors for Hodgkins' person and character.

The oil on cardboard painting entitled *Self-Portrait*: *Still Life* (*ca* 1935) deconstructs, and therefore questions, traditional femininity. A centrally placed bowl, a pink rose, and a pink high-heeled shoe signify the self, the ideally feminine (according to society). Disembodied from any logical context, these objects seem strange and even, in the case of the shoe, ludicrous.

They encourage the viewer to ask: Why are these particular objects considered feminine? What qualities make an object, and by extension a person, feminine? And why are these particular qualities considered feminine at all?

Compositionally, *Self-Portrait: Still Life* functions as an abstract, decorative painting. By combining traditionally feminine objects to create an ornamental pattern, Hodgkins suggests that femininity is something that is both relative and constructed: it is like an ornament that can be added to, but is not inherent in, humans.

In a painting closely related to *Self-Portrait*: *Still Life* and entitled *Still Life*: *Self-Portrait* (*ca* 1933), Hodgkins depicts similar motifs on a canvas. This time, however, she sets a mirror--for obvious reasons a device typically found in self-portraiture--in the center of the composition. The mirror symbolizes Hodgkins' refusal to reflect conventional appearance.

Fiona Clark

In stark contrast to Hodgkins' symbolic and metaphoric paintings are the documentary-style photographs of

contemporary artist Fiona Clark (b. 1954). Although Clark works in the mainstream documentary tradition, she is an innovator in terms of her subject matter and approach.

Clark has a twenty-year record of photographing groups in society that were, and sometimes still are, socially marginalized. She has worked almost exclusively in color since her days in art school in Auckland in the early 1970s.

While still in school, she photographed a series of transvestites that is uncompromising in its depiction of reality. The works focus on both single and multiple subjects who are portrayed with a sensitivity that conveys transvestism as a matter of fact, not as something that is sensational, strange, or shameful.

After leaving art school, Clark continued to produce images that documented the gay, lesbian, and transgender communities of New Zealand. Amy Bock, a lesbian who lived in New Zealand as a man during the early twentieth century, provided the inspiration for one series of images. Club 47, a lesbian nightclub located in New Plymouth, became the focus of another.

Clark's documentary style, combined with the empathy she feels toward her subjects, results in powerful photographs. The artist's works have helped ameliorate prejudice and social disdain toward those groups that are portrayed.

Mika

Like Clark's photographs, the performances of the cabaret star Mika have encouraged widespread acceptance and understanding of homosexuality. In the 1990s, Mika became New Zealand's best-loved drag queen. He is a Maori (the people who are indigenous to New Zealand), and he was born in Te Wai Pounamu, which is located on the southern island of Aotearoa.

Mika began singing as a small child, and at age fourteen began to perform publicly. After a period of acting, singing, and dancing in the *Maori Theatre in Education Company*, he embarked on a solo career. Today he tours internationally.

Mika's choreography fuses Maori, Polynesian, and European dance traditions into what he calls an "urban Maori dance style." He is passionate about the need for fresh, diverse Maori art forms. While he acknowledges the importance of his pre-European contact, or traditional, Maori heritage and pays homage to it during his performances, he also stresses that Maori culture is not dead: it is vital, complex, and everchanging.

Mika's performances often stir controversy since attempts to portray contemporary Maori life often create great debate. Thus, even Mika's most light-hearted shows overflow with content. The artist combines cabaret shows and Maori culture since both reflect an aspect of himself, and also because he despises the notion that indigenous work must be serious and mystical and bereft of joy and fun.

The artistic productions of Frances Hodgkins, Fiona Clark, and Mika are diverse, but they share a similar goal: to break stereotypes and encourage the acceptance of lifestyles that are not considered mainstream. While Hodgkins left her mark in the middle of the twentieth century, Clark and Mika continue to create new and exciting works.

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