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Richard Reddaway

## Shine Your Light On Me

Alice Tappenden

## Headcount

Peter Madden

Richard Orjis

Greg Semu

Christian Thompson

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# untitled (complexity)

*Richard Reddaway*

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Over the years my dad and I have had a number of conversations about, well I suppose you could only say, “race relations” in New Zealand. He and my mother emigrated here from the United Kingdom the year before I was born, both the products of that country’s post-war social experiment: educated as their parents had not been, cared for by the National Health Service and employed in recently nationalised industries. Therefore, for him social justice meant equality through equal access to these things, and the affirmative action policies being implemented in New Zealand in the 80s, such as the appointment of Maori student liaison staff at the Polytechnic where he worked, were anathemas. For my part, I argued Maori had a grievance that needed to be addressed, and the ferment of the times was exciting evidence of the vitality of difference: Baxter’s Jerusalem, Bastion Point and the ’81 anti-Springbok Tour marches. “My generation” and I were sick of the bland sameness of what Roger Douglas described as “the Eastern Europe of the South Pacific”: the one kind of beer with two different labels, the locally made beige “Prince Ferrari” shirts bought from Woolworths, tasteless Colby cheese, Gregg’s instant coffee and the music...oh, the music. Pop/rock Hello Sailor or the hippie zaniness of Blerta was as good as it got.

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And art. Gordon H. Brown and Hamish Keith in “an introduction to New Zealand Painting 1839-1980” describe our Art History as an “orientation towards landscape... and a positive response...to the distinctive qualities of New Zealand light” on the one hand, and on the other as a “problem of the remoteness of New Zealand from any of the major centres of Western art.” They seemed to say all that needed to be said, our art suffered the elegant Modern simplicity of a binary opposition between nationalism and internationalism, bound to provincial disappointment. Artists either stayed and painted sun-drenched hills or left for the United Kingdom to become bitter-drinking suburban reptiles.

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Ah, the 1980s, “A long time ago *in a galaxy far, far away...*”

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It would be natural to think that New Zealand is far away from the baroque: perhaps dour and once protestant, down in the South Pacific and colonised in the nineteenth century by the British for whom the baroque had only ever been a soured flirtation. The suggestion there might now be baroque tendencies in our contemporary culture is faintly ludicrous; it seems to neither suit our history, our sense of identity, nor the good taste we pride ourselves on. And yet, here and now, it is so obvious. Indeed, look at the evidence, the “visual and ideological similarities between the selected works, and the affinities they share with the Baroque period, are striking”.

How is it that “quotation of the Baroque can influence our interpretations of artworks in both the past and the present”?

The most immediate answer to this question is it’s a Post-modern thing.

The monolithic essentialism of Modernism came to be replaced by pluralism in the arts just as the neo-liberal economics of the 1984 Labour government swept aside Robert Muldoon’s Think Big planned economy. Omar Calabrese makes a convincing argument for this in “Neo-Baroque: A Sign of the Times”, describing the

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neo-baroque as “a search for and valorization of forms that display a loss of entirety, totality and system in favor of instability, poly-dimensionality and change”. And you don’t have to read the book to get it, just look at its cover design. If *this* essay were a book, I might try to convince you that we live in baroque times by detailing the formal characteristics of our art, evidently Post-modern baroque qualities such as appropriation and pastiche, complexity and ornamentation or an emphasis on theatricality and sensuality.

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But I would then have to be careful not to institute yet more unproductive binary thinking by positioning the baroque as opposed to the Modern. I don’t want to do this, because I begin to wonder that even if my dad wasn’t right, he was also not wrong. Looking back, our family’s Vauxhall Viva, assembled down the road at the General Motors plant in Trentham from bits made in the United Kingdom, was gold and kinda funky. Maybe it’s nostalgia, because I find myself looking in op-shops for those shirts to wear with my carefully online-purchased Levis 514s and Converse sneakers. And although I don’t think I’ll ever drink instant coffee again, Colby cheese is not bad on a pizza and it’s affordable the way buffalo mozzarella isn’t. Nor do I forget Split Enz or the Suburban Reptiles accompanied by a pint. Even our Art History starts to look more complex and interesting than it ever did, both those artists who stayed and those who left. Think about sculptor John Panting, New Zealand born London-based, whose work can be seen as fitting into the lineage of late modern constructivist sculpture and yet, with a small twist, appears complex, uncertain and dynamic – in a word baroque – in ways that his immediate influences, such as Anthony Caro, do not. Or the architect John Scott, because look at his Maori Battalion Memorial Hall in Palmerston North, commissioned in 1954 and opened ten years later, and wonder at its oddness: a modernist carcass of a building trimmed with carved panels outside and tukutuku inside, this is the global weirdly, beautifully manifest locally. Our art was (and is) always somewhere else, a somewhere that is continually emerging out of trans-cultural flux.

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The baroque has “been with us all the way...”

No, we need to start looking for a third way, other ways to understand ourselves and the various peoples, Pakeha or Palangi, Pasifika, Bidjara man, that we are, whether visitors temporary or permanent to Aotearoa New Zealand. Otherwise we are stuck with no alternative to neo-liberalism.

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# Shine Your Light On Me

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All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players:  
They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts.

– Jaques, in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*

Shine Your Light On Me

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From deep within the bowels of the theatre, a young boy emerges. Turning towards his audience, away from the inky backdrop, he is bathed in a golden spotlight. The beam strikes his lean adolescent shoulder; his silvery tunic; the sheath of his sharpened sword; and then the side of his face, where his brow is furrowed and eyes are downcast. We follow their gaze along his outstretched arm to his prize, gripped in his hand. Hanging from his hair is the severed, huge head of an older man, with his mouth hanging open and rivets of blood streaming from his neck. Like the boy's victor, the man's forehead is wrinkled, but in its centre is a bright spot of blood; a mark of his death. Given the clues, we the audience are able to conclude that this head belonged to Goliath, and that the boy must be David – the Israelite who, with a stone from his sling, defeated the Philistine giant before severing his head to prove that he really was dead. As he holds it out to us, he almost launches it past the edge of the stage, almost lets the giant's blood drip into the laps of the privileged patrons in the front row. For him and us, this head is real. Like the Israelites, we believe it is the truth.

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Of course, what we are looking at, Caravaggio's *David with the Head of Goliath* (1606), is not a play but a painting. The art of the baroque period, however, is known for its move from the High Renaissance's controlled and rational aesthetic, to a mode of representation that is theatrical, dramatic, and which appeals to the viewer's emotions. Like Shakespeare's oft-quoted lines from *As You Like It*, *David with the Head of Goliath* prompts the viewer to consider the theatrical nature of baroque artworks and their approach to life and death. Just how a twenty-first century viewer might digest these themes leads us to our central question: Why has it been necessary to discuss a four-hundred-year-old artwork by a Roman painter in the context of *Headcount*, an exhibition of four contemporary photographers who hail from the Pacific region, in Wellington, New Zealand, in the year 2013?

Mieke Bal's *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* offers one starting point from which to discuss the curatorial decision-making behind *Headcount*. Bal's study addresses the nature of quotation, and in particular, the quotation of the baroque by contemporary Western artists. Writing from a subjective, first-person perspective, Bal proposes that rather than follow a linear, chronological path, the quotation of the past by contemporary artists changes that past forever; in her words, 'the work performed by later images obliterates the older images as they were before that intervention and creates new versions of old images instead.'<sup>1</sup> Artworks from the baroque period, which spans the entirety of the seventeenth century and traverses several European countries, are particularly open to such quotations. Though it is acknowledged that some stylistic similarities – such as an increased emphasis on

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light, shadow, and colour; the breaking-down of the picture-plane barriers between the artwork's world and our world; paint being used for its own sake; and heightened drama and emotion – do exist across works, it is equally acknowledged that there are countless subtle differences between baroque artists.<sup>ii</sup> Rather than simply a 'style', baroque is seen by many art historians and philosophers (including Bal, Gilles Deleuze and Martin Jay) as an entirely different perspective on the world. By reacting against the dominant scopic regime of the bourgeois, which Jay refers to as 'cartesian perspectivalism,'<sup>iii</sup> baroque exploded the 'natural', cold gaze of the Renaissance, and injected emotion, theatre, and a willingness to connect with the audience that stood before it.

Given that Bal, a Dutch scholar, approaches her study from a subjective, first-person perspective, and that the Pacific region largely falls outside the dominant American – and European-focused art historical discourse, it is hardly surprising that artworks from the Pacific do not feature prominently in *Quoting Caravaggio*. However, the methodology she employs allows for those of us viewing *Headcount* to interpret the baroque through the histories we know and the images we see. Like artworks of the baroque period, the works of Peter Madden, Richard Orjis, Greg Semu and Christian Thompson are in some ways very different; however, their approaches to subject matter and style suggest affinities with the baroque and with each other. Of particular importance is the way in which these artists explode and subvert a dominant paradigm. Through their artworks, these artists call into question the dominance of Western approaches to the history of the Pacific region, doing so from the inside out. Christian Thompson, for example, creates new mythological worlds that reference his Bidjara (central south-western Queensland) and British colonial heritage,<sup>iv</sup> whereas Greg Semu removes biblical stories from their European origins and recreates them in a Pacific context. Peter Madden creates his own fantastical microcosms from delicate cut-outs of found images, which surge and recede in a manner that evokes baroque philosophies, and Richard Orjis plays with his Pakeha heritage to create his own mythology. All four address the lands in which they live in a theatrical manner, blending ritualistic, cult undertones of Australasia-Pacific society with elements of the banal and the everyday, marring their semi-imagined lands with colonisation, ritual and excess. To see the works of Madden, Orjis, Semu and Thompson in the same room, with a deliberate emphasis on their baroque nature, may irrevocably change not only the way we see those paintings from four-hundred years ago, but also the way we view other examples of photography from the Pacific.

An ode to his great-great-grandfather, Indigenous Australian artist Christian Thompson's *Untitled #7* from the *King Billy* series (2010) presents the viewer with a masked figure who seems to come from another world – or at least a parallel one. Swathed in lurid, candy-coloured patterns that reference indigenous clans and are perhaps destined for the tourist market, with a cheap toy crown perched on his head and a sawn-off chalice held in porcelain-white hands, the faceless figure simultaneously draws us closer and edges us away. We are mesmerised by his clothing's luscious, ornate patterning, but their underlying cheapness is off-putting, as is the cup in his hands, decapitated from its base. We ask ourselves: Will having a sip from his glass take us to a promised land, or will things only get worse?

For the viewer, *Untitled #7* seems to transgress the limits of aesthetic and illusionistic pleasure and non-pleasure, and according to Bal, this is a trope of Caravaggio's paintings, especially when we are drawn into theatrically-staged scenes of suffering.<sup>v</sup> *Untitled #7* does not depict suffering so directly as, say, Caravaggio's *The Incredulity*

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of *Saint Thomas* (1601-1602), but it could be interpreted as a reference to the long-term suffering of Australia's Indigenous peoples. The *King Billy* series was inspired by a photograph of Thompson's great-great-grandfather, King Billy of Bonnie Doon, Lorne, Queensland, depicted wearing an Aboriginal breastplate. Such breastplates were commonly given by Europeans to Indigenous Australian individuals that were seen as having control over their communities, and are sometimes seen as symbols of the dispossession and mistreatment of indigenous people by Europeans.<sup>vi</sup> By blending his indigenous heritage with elements of contemporary society, Thompson creates a new, hybrid identity for himself and other Indigenous Australians. The baroque stylistic tropes that he employs only emphasise the mythological nature of his character. *Untitled #7*'s deep, black background, spotlight figure, luminous colour, and the shadowy folds of the man's clothing all bring to mind to the theatricality of *David with the Head of Goliath*. Thompson's figure engages the viewer, and causes us to question not only his identity, but our own.

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Like *Untitled #7*, Peter Madden's *Assemblage for the Production of Dust* (2012) is a work that is at once mystical and banal, playful and menacing. At first glance, the intricate collage presents an ominous sign: the inverted silhouette of a hollow-eyed human skull. Move closer, however, and Madden's signature cut-out forms are revealed to be a medley of figures and objects that range from palm trees, angels, and bats, to fish, skulls, ducks, owls, cactii, and more. As they dance and flicker before our eyes, we become aware of an oscillation between the microscopic and the macroscopic, and the necessity of smaller parts in making up a concise whole. This kind of oscillation is often discussed with regards to baroque architecture, such as Ernst Gombrich's commentary on Giacomo della Porta's Il Gesù Church (c.1575) in Rome. Il Gesù's façade is replete with curving scrolls, and without these small details, Gombrich suggests the entire building would 'fall apart.'<sup>vii</sup> Also of note are the interiors of such churches, with Il Gesù's ceiling featuring baroque painter Giovanni Battista Gaulli's fresco, *Triumph of The Name of Jesus* (1676-1679). Looking up, such frescos provide the viewer with a dizzying view of their subjects, and aim to pull us beyond the church's ceiling and into the sky. By sandwiching its figures between two sheets of clear perspex, *Assemblage for the Production of Dust* is similarly dazzling. As we move towards, away from, and around the work, the shadows cast by the cut-outs against the gallery wall move as we move. These shadows force the work to continue outside its flat surfaces, and encourage the viewer to become an active participant in its expansion. Our bedazzlement relates to the way in which some baroque philosophers discuss 'the fold' – the enigmatic twisting and turning of the world upon itself that was first conjured by German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz and that has been expanded upon by others, most notably Deleuze. Tom Conley, translator of *Deleuze's The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, states that the fold:

... could be located in the protracted fascination we experience in watching waves heave, tumble, and atomize when they crack along an unfolding line being traced along the expanse of a shoreline; in following the curls and wisps of colour that move on the surface and in the infinite depths of a tile of marble; or, as Proust described, when we follow the ramifying and dilating branches of leaves piled in the concavity of the amber depths of a cup of tea.<sup>viii</sup>

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To gaze simultaneously at the big picture and its small details, and to be equally fascinated by both, and by the way in which the forms of our world interact, is to experience the baroque fold, which is conjured by Madden's *Assemblage for the*

*Production of Dust.* Within his worlds, too, is an acknowledgment of time and space that aligns with the intentions of *Headcount*. As Madden states, within his collages, there lies ‘a play in time frames and discursive frames; images that belong to different discourses and historical moments come together in the same time and space.’<sup>ix</sup>

Bringing together different moments in the time and space of a photograph is a principal element of Greg Semu’s *Auto portrait with twelve disciples* from *The Last Cannibal Supper... cause tomorrow we become Christians* series (2010). Semu, an artist of Pacific Island heritage who was born and raised in New Zealand, was undertaking an artist residency at Noumea’s Tjibaou Cultural Centre when he created the series. This residency provided an opportunity to realise a project he had been contemplating for more than a decade: a photographic reenactment of Leonardo Da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* (1495-1498), set on a Pacific stage and featuring himself playing the role of Christ.<sup>x</sup> Given that the Tjibaou Cultural Centre’s name pays homage to the leader of the indigenous Kanak peoples’ independence movement, Jean Marie Tjibaou, who was assassinated in 1989, and that Semu’s works regularly address issues surrounding colonialism in the Pacific, it was only fitting that Semu worked with local Kanak people to create *The Last Cannibal Supper... cause tomorrow we become Christians* series. According to Semu, Christianity both ‘saved and paralysed’ indigenous cultures such as New Caledonia’s.<sup>xi</sup> By provoking viewers to consider the effects of colonisation by powerful nations such as France, Semu, like Thompson, asks us to question the effects of Western actions on Pacific communities, and the dominance of Western approaches to history. Interestingly, Semu has spoken of the influence baroque art has had upon his photographic practice; while living in Paris, he became intrigued by the old masters, particularly Caravaggio.<sup>xii</sup> This influence is clear in *Auto portrait with twelve disciples*, whose theatrical tableau presents a range of figures which come out of shadowy backgrounds before being bathed in soft light. Their muscular, chiaroscuro forms extend towards the viewer, drawing us into the story and causing us to look upon Semu’s Christ with equal admiration. Semu, it seems, is not only appropriating Western religion, but Western art history. The photograph causes us to turn history on its head; rather than passively receive the past, we are pushed to question it, and to consider what, exactly, are the Pacific’s most fruitful narratives? What does it mean to a culture to be simultaneously saved and overtaken? What Semu’s work highlights most, however, is the way in which biblical narratives have become Pacific narratives, and become part of Pacific culture in a deeply meaningful way.

Unlike *Autoportrait with twelve disciples*, Richard Orjis’s iconic *Flower Idol* (2006) does not simply evoke traditional biblical stories, but rather, works against them. Actively rejecting Exodus 20:3’s command that ‘Thou shalt have no other gods before me’, *Flower Idol* presents a mud-masked man intent upon seducing his viewers with ritualistic excess. Sitting before a black ground that refuses to give away the context of this new Idol’s world, the mud-masked man rests his hands camly on his knees, and stares us directly in the eye. In front of him, a plethora of exotic floral blooms, in bright, fiery hues, reach towards us, beckoning us closer. Some are tubular and phallic, suggestive of the man’s power; others are more delicate, appealing to our mother-earth sensibilities. Upon closer inspection, however, we notice that some of the flowers are on the edge of decay, on the cusp of returning to the dirt from which they rose. Orjis here seems to be employing the same principal of pleasure versus non-pleasure that is seen in Thompson’s *Untitled #7*; one duly noted by Tessa Laird, who observes that: ‘A carnal love of DIRT [in Orjis’s lexicon] flies in the face of the universal fear of mortality, embracing decay as its own beauty.’<sup>xiii</sup> Unlike Thompson, however, it has been suggested by writers such as Anna-Marie White that as a pākehā, it is Orjis’s perceived lack of a

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glamorous 'indigenous' culture that has prompted him to create an entirely new cult for us to consider joining.<sup>xiv</sup> If you're not part of 'something' already, would you like to be? Such a calling began to stretch beyond *Flower Idol* soon after it was first exhibited; in 2008, Orjis staged an exhibition at Christchurch's Physics Room, *Welcome to the Jungle*, which invited locals to smear themselves in charcoal dust, have their photograph taken, and join the artist's CULT of CHCH. As a participant in this process myself, I remember arriving at the Physics Room that evening, seeing bare-shirted men swathed in dust worshipping a coal pile, and our photographs projected in a room full of sweet-smelling steam. For that evening, one did feel part of an exotic, alternative community, regardless of ethnicity. Such a connection, of course, comes with what David Eggleton calls a 'poisonous tinge';<sup>xv</sup> not just in deadly hothouse flowers that populate Orjis's images, but also in the huge risk one takes when joining the cult. There is a large possibility that this leader is not to be trusted. Might we be rejected outright; will our beauty not measure up? Will we be thrown upon the coals, sacrificed for a greater good? Or will the Christian God we turned our backs on come back to haunt us: will this man see the same fate as Goliath; destroyed and beheaded?

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According to Bal, the baroque period 'led, for the first time in Western history, to something we call self-reflection, a self-consciousness of the human individual.'<sup>xvi</sup> Through their artworks, Madden, Orjis, Semu and Thompson reflect their human selves – their identities – and invite the viewer to do the same. Their works reach out to us, not only physically, through the picture plane, but psychologically. *Headcount* asks the viewer to question themselves, but also to question the stories we know and the truthfulness of what we see. Of course, one must always exit the theatre. Thompson's man will remove his mask; Madden's figures will be left alone by their viewers; Semu's Kanak people will go back to their daily lives in Noumea; and Orjis's idol will wipe off his mud-mask and return to his day job. As viewers of *Headcount* walk down the rickety staircase of Enjoy, and out into the light of Cuba Street, they will hopefully be prompted to think: just what can happen when aesthetics, art history, and cultures of the Pacific intersect?

Headcount

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- i Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 1.
- ii For example, see Ernst Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1972), or Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art Two: Renaissance, Mannerism, Baroque* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962).  
Hauser and Gombrich.
- iii Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), 5.
- iv Anthony Luvera, "Populate or Perish," in *Hijacked III*, ed. Louise Clements, Mark McPherson, Leigh Robb (Cottesloe: Big City Press, 2012), xii.  
Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio*, 20.
- vi "Breastplates," Queensland Museum South Bank, accessed November 2, 2013, <http://www.southbank.qm.qld.gov.au/Events+and+Exhibitions/Exhibitions/Permanent/Dandiiri+Maiwar/Perspectives/Breastplates>.
- vii Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, 303.
- viii Tom Conley, "Translator's Foreword: A Plea for Leibniz," in Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xii-xi.
- ix Peter Madden quoted in "Orgasm and Trauma: Peter Madden talks to Robert Leonard," in *Peter Madden*, ed. Evie Franzidis (Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art, 2011), 84.
- x Steve Kilgallon, "Art rewards 'are there'," accessed November 2, 2013, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/arts/5876344/Art-rewards-are-there>
- xi Ibid.
- xii Ibid.
- xiii Tessa Laird, "Arcana in Satin Pajamas: A Richard Orjis Lexicon," in *So Give Me The Night: The Art of Richard Orjis*, ed. Tracey Williams (Auckland: Papakura Art Gallery, 2012), 4.
- xiv Anna-Marie White, "Richard Orjis," in *The Maui Dynasty* exhibition catalogue (Nelson: The Suter Art Gallery Te Aratoi o Whakatū, 2008), 28.
- xv David Eggleton, "Underworld: the Art of Richard Orjis," in Richard Orjis, *Park*, (Self-published: 2011), 93.
- xvi Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio*, 28.

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