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LISTENER

Why I made: Sculptor Brett Graham on war memorials and making colossal art

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By Dionne Christian

With skilled hands, a curious mind and an eye towards indigenous histories and philosophies, Brett Graham transforms ordinary pieces of wood and stone into monumental sculptures.

Right now, his 8.5m *Wakefield Dreaming* commands attention at Waiheke Island's Sculpture on the Gulf; late last year, New Plymouth's Govett-Brewster Art Gallery raised \$250,000 to buy Graham's *Cease Tide of Wrong-Doing*, a behemoth that stands nearly 10m tall and 3m wide.

The 57-year-old is now preparing to travel to Italy as one of eight New Zealand artists whose work is in the Venice Biennale's international exhibition *Stranieri Ovunque, Foreigners Everywhere*. He's also making new art for this year's Walters Prize – he was nominated for the 2020-21 show *Tai Moana Tai Tangata* shown in New Plymouth, Wellington and Christchurch – and for the Queensland Art Gallery.

Of Ngāti Korokī Kahukura and Tainui iwi, Graham's father, the influential sculptor Fred Graham – still making at age 95 – the late Selwyn Muru, Paratene Matchitt and Ralph Hotere were early influences.

Why do you make such colossal sculpture?

I'm not obsessed with size but with occupying space in a commanding way. Every work has different challenges. Large forms in difficult, inaccessible spaces always create intrigue because the viewer marvels at the miracle of how the object came to be in the space. However, if an installation really works, it should appear effortless, and the viewer lost in the physical

sensation of the work on the body's senses.

Even when I was at art school [Elam], I made installations that were all essentially monuments. One was inspired by the words of Princess Te Puea and also a reflection on the NZ Wars Memorial on Symonds St, in Auckland City.

I would walk past it every day and think about the inscription which reads: "In memory of the brave men belonging to the imperial and colonial forces and the friendly Maoris who gave their lives for their country during the New Zealand Wars, 1845-1872."

I wondered about the dismissal of the "unfriendly" Māori, who were people essentially fighting for their land and how they were demonised as rebels. They were our iwi of Waikato. So, I became interested in remembrance.

Growing up in Manurewa and Waiuku, sure, you could pick up books and look at wonderful Michelangelos or whatever, but the main examples – especially if you grew up in the suburbs or rural – were war memorials.

What are the materials you enjoy working with most – and why?

I have a natural affinity for wood and my father, grandfather and great-uncle Waka Kereama were all artists or carvers. However, I'll use whatever material best suits the concept at large. In *Tai Moana Tai Tangata*, I used plaster because the relief resembles Victorian ceiling panels and also velvet and damask fabric, for *Black Shroud*. I have a fascination with lost crafts from both sides of my whakapapa.

Wakefield Dreaming is essentially a prison watch tower. What's the story behind it?

I find it intriguing that Edward Gibbon Wakefield, who started the New Zealand Company to make money out setting up colonies here, dreamed up his colonisation scheme when he was in prison for the abduction of a 15-year-old girl. Arriving here, colonial institutions had no place for Māori, so they had to make ones. They created the penal system.

How are each of the works, notably *Wakefield Dreaming* and *Cease Tide of Wrong-Doing*, put together?

That would be telling! *Wakefield Dreaming* is essentially a building. Biggs Construction Company do a lot of work on Waiheke Island and built this from concept drawings. For three weeks, I was on site with them and could observe what magnificent builders they are.

Cease Tide of Wrong-Doing was built from island Kauri by a company called Naturally Wood in

my hometown of Waiuku. I've worked with them for several years.

There's about five or six people who I work closely with, including my cousin Eugene Kara, from Maungatautari. My friend, Matene Sisnett, does a lot of the carving, and on stone projects, I often work with Stephen Woodward, a fine sculptor. There's a team behind me.

Did you always want to make art?

Yes, I caught that disease fairly early on.

You were scribbling on the new wallpaper, then?

Well, it wasn't new wallpaper, so I thought I had every right to draw on it.

How influential was your dad, Fred Graham?

He was making all the time, but he kind of tried to discourage me. That said, at the same time the undertone was always encouraging. He was a high school teacher, he taught art.

Selwyn Muru became a mentor to me. He was such a great counter to my father, who's a lovely, gentle apologist for all the bad behaviour in the past whereas Selwyn was unyielding and wouldn't put up with any crap from anybody.

Did you learn much about Māori art or New Zealand history at high school?

I went to King's College; it was ... quite a racist school in those days, many of the teachers were foreigners and had no time for te ao Māori but here's the irony. They talk about how there was no NZ history in the curriculum, but they did teach NZ history. It all comes down to the sensitivity of the teachers. Mr Whelan I remember introduced me to Māori material and to the YMP [Young Māori Party], the influential Māori leaders from the beginning of last century. I admired Reverend Richard Buttle, too. He taught at King's for 30 years before becoming the Auckland City Missioner.

So, you went to Elam straight after school?

Yeah, I think I would have been a difficult student because all my heroes were contemporary Māori artists. That's what I wanted to know about, but it was a different time and there wasn't a lot included, so I would have been hard to teach.

How different was it when you went to the University of Hawai'i to do a Master of Fine Arts?

It was a real meeting point for a lot of Pacific scholars. I went to classes by people like Haunani-Kay Trask, who was one of the founders of the Hawai'ian sovereignty movement Ka Lāhui Hawai'i, so I started to think about whakapapa, Pasifika/Moana identity, and the movement of people. I went to the Southwest USA and experienced Pueblo life with First Nations Americans. I came back and taught at Elam until 2004. I've been a fulltime artist since.

How has your work changed over time?

Well, you have to keep on evolving. You can have fantastic ideas but if you don't have the practical means of making, that's where all your ideas remain. Now, I do have a practical means of bringing concepts to life. So that's the joy of after 32 years of practice, being able to do that. I'm still interested in commemoration, and remembrance of, the land wars - te riri Pākehā [white man's anger].

With *Sculpture on the Gulf*, you're also working with Robert Leonard as a curatorial adviser?

That's right. Robert is a very experienced curator. He's themed this year's show *Anything Can Happen*, and brought onboard 21 artists, mainly from New Zealand and one artist, Nicholas Galanin, from Alaska, who are doing exciting things. I'm kind of hesitant to name names in case I forget anyone, but there's such a breadth of practice.

What does a sculpture show do to the people who go to view it?

Sculpture is interesting in that it's changed so much. Contemporary art and what was considered sculpture or installation has expanded so far beyond the public imagination of something you place on a plinth in front of people. So, definitely one of the purposes is to broaden people's eyes as to what sculpture or installation is. We want it to be testing, in a way so there are artists who aren't just the "usual suspects".

What are your hopes for each of your works?

Objects all tell stories, narratives are important in indigenous art. The best art, I believe, is a slow burn where you don't necessarily understand the meaning at first. You might find it disturbing, without knowing why.

What's the strangest thing you've ever heard said or read about your work OR the most pleasing?

A friend and brilliant Pacific scholar from my University of Hawai'i days, Teresia Teaiwa, once wrote to me and said I had a responsibility to make powerful works as a voice for the Pacific.

This is what I have always strove to do. The journey is ongoing.

Sculpture on the Gulf, Matiatia Coastal Walkway, Waiheke Island, until March 24.

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