

James Ormsby and Symbol at Whitespace Gallery.

In empiricism, the symbols you use to represent the world, simply represent the world, more or less. But in the mental and linguistic world, the symbols you use to represent the world, are also involved in creating the world, and there is the great difference.¹

KEN WILBER

Artists make great use of the world of symbol and systems such as language and image. In the sense of art, science and philosophy, without symbol, we would be less evolved human beings. For symbol provides rich ideas of where we have come from, including how we see and understand humankind across millennia. Including, how others see us, across generations.

At its simplest, a symbol is a thing that represents or stands for something like an emblem, figure, sign or gesture and proof of something. This includes tangible or material objects, marks, or characteristics. At the other extreme, symbol is a potent and complex language developed by humankind. Across global history, symbol is considered to be a creative and philosophical tool that draws people closer together.

Try as we may, to better comprehend symbol, we discover that on their own, symbol is not quite the same without interpretation. For we crave explanations about, or seek out meaningful experience via symbol. In the cycle of searching and self-reflection, what we perhaps desire, is a paradigm shift that allows one to co-create ways of seeing differently. In academia, certain frameworks of intellectualisation create boundaries rather than expand thought, around symbol. What is needed, is a way to triangulate a way back to the purpose of symbol, for this may offer ways to inspire each other through direct experience, and joy.

Joy

Joy is the dynamic aspect of *Being*. When the creative power of the universe becomes conscious of itself, it manifests as joy.

ECKHART TOLLE

We attract to us what we emanate.

DAVID HAWKINS

We each bring personal traditions to the table of discovery including ones upbringing, education, discipline, experience and influences. These are only some of the tools that allow a framing of personal discoveries. What we do know, is that when these things converge, they allow a textural richness. They allow exchange to happen with awareness and honesty, for to be of real use, they have to offer robust and mature discussion. And for me, discovery brings about joy in many dimensions. Even when you think it does not.

¹ For further reading, see Ken Wilber's *Eye To Eye: The Quest for the New Paradigm* published by Shambala: Boston, 2001.

If you have met James Ormsby, you will know that his joy emanates from within, as if from consciousness itself. His joy is indeed contagious, and it is easy to be drawn-in, reflection after reflection... once a conversation has been initiated and engaged. This is completely in keeping with the nature of discourse, exchange and further discourse.

His image-based practice is equally persuasive, for the literal and metaphoric layers in James' drawings, seem to me to represent a horizontal dimension to his thinking. Cultural layers in his art are somehow a complimentary vertical dimension of some depth... a threshold if you like, to expanding understanding. Which brings me to the idea, that his 'joy' is actually, a spiritual practice: alive and unpolluted by negative influences. For joy does hold spirit. And I do not mean spiritual in what might be interpreted as religious. Rather, I mean spiritual in an aware and humanly conscious way. The word spirit in French tradition literally means to 'breathe'. Spirit, in its Christian Latin version, means 'the breath of life.'

Truth

We must know the whole truth about ourselves. In ruthless self-analysis lies the key to progress. Once the true picture is drawn, we can proceed to re-draw it.

LAKSHIMI LAL

Maorigami is about the scientific and political colonisation of our Maori visual culture. For far too long Kowhaiwhai has only been categorised and studied through western systems of evaluation. Perhaps to the point where our *Art is made tongue-tied by authority*². Maorigami is about expanding the knowledge of kowhaiwhai out from engrained academic conventions. Maori visual culture is much more than regional style, sign and symbol, geometry and decoration. I believe it is time now for kowhaiwhai design analysis to extend outwards – in this case to *ethno-mathematics* (e.g. origami).

*No rule. No complexity. No rank. No mind.
No bottom. No hindrance. No stirring.*

The designs – or visual language, of Ethno-mathematics is much more than the sum of these conceptual characteristics. These are simply pointers to help us unpack, articulate, decode and grasp my Maorigami. They do not explain any given kowhaiwhai pattern or language, or tell us how it is made.³

JAMES ORMSBY

James' truth is clear and simple, the exactness of his cadence a joy. By example, his pursuit of creative growth and expansion, allows him to overcome encumbrances that can otherwise trap ideas. His creative processes enhance his imaginative juices, perhaps because he opens his consciousness, to manifest a spiritual depth of some

² This is a famous quote by William Shakespeare and a searing comment on dramatic and theatrical censorship in Elizabethan times.

³ Maorigami Series background notes from the artist dated 2006.

importance.⁴ And this allows him to re-draw himself, because he is creating understanding and new knowledge.

Interpretation

All depth requires interpretation.
KEN WILBER

Whether or not you can observe a thing depends on the theory you use. It is the theory that decides what can be observed.
ALBERT EINSTEIN

In the world of hermeneutics, there are those who give thoughtful expression to knowledge, and those who interpret the world of knowledge. Then there are those who practice, inspire and advance understanding, through the pursuit of truth — the integration of what we know — by intelligently questioning and unpacking the meaning of life. What great thinkers, writers, or artists do is to bring excitement to an idea or discussion, by combining the old and the new, and sharing what one learned...because we know that understanding occurs in interpretation.

What I recognise in James is this. He is triangulating his way to ‘meaning’ through a deep self-understanding of Symbol, Joy and Truth, or as philosopher, Manulani Aluli Meyer explains in her writings, through Body, Mind and Spirit⁵. To my knowledge, this tri-part practice is not so common in contemporary Maori art today, indeed in art criticism, period. At some level, this is simply because we are brought up to think and behave in certain ways, and an old habit, is like a comfortable chair. Moreover, we are conditioned to respond in patterned ways, for this behaviour is imprinted on our psyche. Despite ourselves, we know that old patterns do not allow for new responses and understandings of new challenges. Especially in the world of image and symbol, for it is easier to regard or privilege old patterns, only because we are used to being told what to think... rather than how to think.

I did not set out to ‘liberate’ symbol, joy or truth in this writing. Rather I wanted to seek out robust opportunities for artists like James, and writers such as myself to bring forth new patterns of knowing, understanding and meaning. Interpretation is not fixed in time, and are not always definitive, right, wrong nor simply indifferent, because we are not all the same people. We also do not have to share the same world-view.

⁴ Although one cannot ‘know’ consciousness itself, one can become conscious of it as yourself... for consciousness is a traditional word for spirit. For further reading, see New Earth by Eckhart Tolle’s *A New Earth* published by Dutton, a member of Penguin Books USA 2005.

⁵ I borrow this term from the studies of indigenous philosopher Associate Professor Manulani Aluli Meyer, who teaches at University of Hawaii, Hilo. Her introduction to the Triangulation to Meaning is through Body, Mind and Spirit. Meyer has written widely on the beauty of indigenous epistemology or more specifically, Hawaiian ways of knowing. For further reading on the Triangulation of Meaning see ‘Changing the Culture of Research: An Introduction to the Triangulation of Meaning, published in Hulili: Multidisciplinary Research on Hawaiian Wellbeing Vol 3, No. 1, published by Kamehameha Schools 2006. For an in-depth discussion see Meyer’s chapter in ‘Indigenous and Authentic: Native Hawaiian Epistemology and The Triangulation of Meaning’ in L Smith, N Denzin and Y Lincoln (eds) *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies* Published by Sage, New York, 2006

However, we find ourselves at this point, because we want to experience the world differently, and because it helps us get to the next point in our learning. We just have to hear, see and feel other perspectives on the subject, and then talk to each other. As Derrida observed: 'Speech offers the most direct access to consciousness. The voice can seem to be consciousness itself.'

Ngahiraka Mason

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