



## Scene at last

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Forty years ago, elders at John Walsh's home marae rejected the mural he'd created for them. Now that it's finally on display, have the wounds healed?

Usually, ground-breaking art gets seen – in a gallery or at least in a private home – even (or especially) if it's highly controversial. But John Walsh's mural *A Portrait of Ūawa, Tolaga Bay in 1980* has, at his request, been hidden away for 38 years in a friend's studio in Napier.

John, a likeable man with a lively sense of humour, meets me at the New Zealand Portrait Gallery. He has just seen the mural hung, for the very first time, before the opening of the exhibition *John Walsh: A Portrait of Ūawa Tolaga Bay* (on until 10 February). The career survey also displays some of his rarely-seen portrait paintings, largely of people from his iwi. They are striking taonga, but it's hard to look away from the main attraction.

Twenty metres long, and 3.6 metres tall, the massive mural he painted tells a story about the landscape, inhabitants and heritage of Ūawa (the Māori name for both Tolaga Bay on the North Island's east coast and for the coastal village there where John grew up). Ten conjoined panels depict 60 or so people from a cross-section of the community, including a postie waving from her truck, a surfer riding a wave, and an elder shucking pāua.

The mural merges real and imagined worlds by depicting living people alongside spiritual figures. On the far left, John's mate Jay Gibson stands next to the spirit of an ancestor, and further right is Jesus (because Christianity became intertwined with Māori culture). 'My mother is under Jesus' elbow. That's my son below her.' The artwork encompasses not just the past and present of Ūawa but also the future; for instance, a rocket with a tiki attached flies towards a space station where humans may have to live one day.

As John looks over the mural, he has a half-smile on his face. 'It's pretty amazing to look into the eyes of all these people. Of course, they've all changed since then – kids have grown up, many older people have passed on. I feel all sorts of emotions because it has such a full-on story behind it.'

It sure does. In the late 1970s John, a local portrait artist, approached kaumātua (elders) at Ūawa's central marae Hauiti. He suggested he create a large-scale painting to celebrate the community. The kaumātua said yes. 'It was intended to greet manuhiri [guests] as they came onto the marae.' Why make it so huge and unusual? 'I wanted to do something different for my art practice, for the marae, for Māori art.' In 1978 John set to work in an old woolstore behind the Tolaga Bay wharf. 'One day, I was in my mother's cookery shop, and someone came in and asked me how I was getting on with that "muriel". The name "Muriel" stuck.'

It took him 18 months. But, on seeing it, the kaumātua decided the mural was too radical for the marae and that it challenged established concepts of traditional Māori art. They turned it down. John was upset. 'Back then, many maraes welcomed the changes in contemporary Māori art, but my marae was very conservative.' He says he was trying to help them move forward. John was 'a little surprised' that some Māori artists openly disliked the mural. The controversy attracted media attention. When everything died down, he felt the mural had been 'broken' – as in tainted – to the point he didn't want it displayed.

Did he feel angry? Resentful? Confused? 'All those things. But I have no bad feeling towards anyone. They made up their mind and that's



what it was. They're good people. To me it's a story about human nature. We all put forward ideas and we don't always get the response we want. We all have to battle our egos.'

He began his career by attending Ilam School of Fine Arts in Christchurch from 1973 to 1974. 'I ran away from Ilam. I wasn't prepared to be barked at by post-modernists!' So, in between farm work and fishing, he taught himself the fundamentals of painting by tackling portraits. John became the first Māori artist to paint realist portraits of Māori individuals (particularly kaumātua); they capture the spirit, identity and pride of his people. 'But after a while I wanted to get away from portraiture which to me – and I don't want to offend anyone – is intense copying.'

Cue the Muriel affair. The hangover of emotions was one reason he eventually shifted to Gisborne, in 1987. Leaving Ūawa wasn't easy, after years of sun, surf, fishing and close ties with whanau. His iwi is Te Atinga-a-Hauiti (the descendants of Hauiti). One of his ancestors established the wananga Te Rawheoro which taught tribal traditions and carving for many generations at Ūawa, but closed soon after European settlement.

He worked throughout the 1980s on restoring historically important wharenui and creating kōwhaiwhai (painted designs) for them, continuing a Māori art form begun in the 1860s. He soon became the regional representative of Ngā Puna Waihanga (a national collective of Māori artists and writers), ran art courses, then became Tairāwhiti Museum's exhibitions officer. In 1993 he moved to Wellington to become Te Papa's inaugural curator of contemporary Māori art, and subsequently a general art curator there, partly for steady money to support his family of six. John

enjoyed interacting with artists, curators and collections. 'I didn't enjoy the bureaucracy.' In 2002 he became a full-time artist, but didn't consider leaving Wellington. 'I like its energy, and my close contact with many contemporary artists and the arts industry.'

John, who lives in Lyall Bay, has exhibited extensively in New Zealand, in Wellington with Page Blackie Gallery and overseas. The new exhibition includes many of his early portraits of people from his iwi. 'Most of the portraits went into private homes, so this is the first time they've been together in a public gallery'. You'll also see two of the many narrative landscape paintings he's created in recent decades. This body of work depicts New Zealand landscapes (or dreamscapes) derived from Māori culture and European myths – for instance, depicting ancient gods and mer-men. Each tells a story.

'Muriel' tells two stories on two levels – about the people of Ūawa, and also about their reaction to the artwork. Some locals have always supported him. Carloads of people from Ūawa – Māori and Pākehā – road-tripped to Wellington for the exhibition's opening. Ūawa art collective Toi Hauiti had encouraged Walsh to exhibit the mural, but he didn't suggest it until curator Helen Kedgley asked if she could put together a survey exhibition of his career.

What's next for Muriel? 'Well, this exhibition won't resolve anything. It's just part of the mural's story and the story will carry on.' Yes, he would like it to find a permanent home. 'But I'm not holding my breath. I'm not anxious about it.' Would he ask his marae to have it, now? 'I'm not going to ask. It's up to them. It's been a long time, and the community still has mixed feelings about it. But I've moved on. The wounds have healed.' ■