

Kaitiaki
Gill Gatfield
Te tuhi-the mark

Absorbing Issues

There are some things people want to be kept under wraps: the body, for one thing, and our care of its processes, for another. But the reality is that no one body, one state of being, one nation, or community can remain hermetically sealed. Things will seep out, mingle, spill, leak, interact, grow and eventually seek to breathe and change. And it all happens around the edges – the periphery.

For an artist dealing with the issues that arise from an investigation of ‘body’, be it a body of knowledge, a body of cultural practices, laws and values or of human flesh and blood, an intense mosaic of references inevitably arises. Gill Gatfield addresses these facets in her work, *Kaitiaki*, as part of **te tuhi- the mark**’s 2004 Cameo Project. In Maori, kaitiaki refers to the role of caretaker, protector, or babysitter. In her installation, the artist draws on this interpretation of kaitiaki as protector to explore themes of culture, identity, family and values in a post colonial, post feminist context.

What is immediately felt when viewing the wall of multiple disposable nappies is a simultaneous attraction and repulsion towards the notion of the body, in its widest interpretation, and its public exposure. On the one hand, there is the comforting process of the care and protection of precious treasures. On the other hand, there is a sense of vulnerability, personal invasion, potential abuse, insanity, disposable societies, ecological and environmental damage.

Gatfield begins by addressing the exhibiting space and the mundane, unexpected materials she uses in her installation. Seeking beauty in the abject, the toxic, the ugly and the disposable, initially she aims to reveal the poise, elegance and potential of her materials. ‘The task is not to perfect the materials but to open them up, see their possibilities and consider...the idea,’ she writes¹. By using repeating, identical and effectively mute units she confronts the notion that *more* is necessary when it is the silence in *less* that she seeks.

In lining a wall with stretched, soft nappies, she is approaching the gallery space as a physical entity - transforming the wall into an ambiguous field that acts in one sense like pampered skin, as it is turned into a living breathing pulsating body to be treasured, touched, and transformed. Simultaneously, by presenting the nappies with the inside facing outwards, it seems that she may be swaddling the viewer in a skewed sort of reassurance.

¹ Artist’s dissertation notes, 2003.

But the sense of safety dissipates. On the face of it, particularly to those of us who are parents, *Kaitiaki* conveys a domestic site of cleanliness, controlled biology, and cradled containment, indicating we are keeping our houses/bodies in order. But, in contrast, the construction and layering of the nappies on the wall defies the invitation for comfort. It seems instead to mimic other forms of containment - the suffocating uniformity of suburban off-white concrete block walls, for example, or more menacingly, the padded cell. The installation may be stripped of human presence, but still it is imbued with human drama.

In *Kaitiaki*, as in much of her other work over the last two years at Elam School of Fine Arts, she addresses the symbolic idea of the inside falling out, the opposing notions of centre or margin, objective or subjective, indigenous or introduced, sanity or insanity, guardianship or destruction. Between these polarities, Gatfield places a theory of liminality – a threshold position characterised by ambiguity and ambivalence. There is a hovering at the edge, the threshold between inside and outside – and the space given to marginal voices.

The horizontal and vertical placements of the installation hints at weaving processes but also references the wider repetition, displacement and overlapping inherent in the on-going formation of a culture. Cultural theorist Homi K. Bhabha writes, ‘the space of the modern nation-people is never simply horizontal.’² As cultural movements develop and change, so a singular, central narrative disperses and new stories / ideas seep out. In this light, *Kaitiaki* can be read as a work which raises issues that are currently grabbing headlines – for example, the sanitising and defining of art and culture, the economics of consumerism, the role of caregivers and the protection of the environment.

From many perspectives, disposable nappies are bad news. The statistics related to the environmental impact of dumping tonnes of disposable nappies filled with plastic, chemicals and little parcels of human excrement are horrifying. They can take an estimated 500 years to break down in landfills, for example, while new research shows a potential connection between the chemical compounds found in disposables (take a whiff, you can detect a chemical smell in these clean nappies) and male infertility, asthma and hormone disruption. And yet, ninety per cent of New Zealand babies use disposable nappies, getting through 572 million a year.

Somewhere between the frightening facts and the daily realities of contemporary life, women are effectively suppressing their concerns and making decisions and compromises in the attempt to seek a balance between their own needs and those of the family. The debate raging between ‘nappy factions’ will no doubt continue as families battle it out between convenience and conservation.

² Homi K. Bhabha (ed.) *Nation and Narration*, Routledge, London & New York, 1990.

Central to Gatfield's installation are the concepts of kaitiaki and kaitiakitanga. These concepts have formal, customary standing for Maori, vesting iwi with the care and protection of its lands and resources, both physical and spiritual, on behalf of future generations. Protection is understood as one of the key principles of the Treaty of Waitangi, along with partnership and redress.

Drawing on her background as a lawyer, most particularly in the field of human rights and discrimination, Gatfield identified over 100 references to the role of kaitiaki in New Zealand legislation. Laws relating to resource management, claims settlements, forestry, fishing, libraries and education, require consultation with kaitiaki as the practical means through which cultural and spiritual values can be heard. Gatfield notes that 'in practice this becomes a process of negotiation where guardianship concerns are balanced against the aims of commerce and government.'

Gatfield points out that waste disposal is one critical resource question where kaitiaki, in its widest sense, is yet to have a full public hearing. In this context, the clean, empty *Kaitiaki* wall refers to this impending debate where ideas of protection, care, nurturing and honouring may conceivably construct quite a different blueprint for New Zealand.

As a recent quick scan of the many letters to the editor in the daily newspapers reveals, New Zealanders are motivated to debate issues around the Treaty and the way it is translated into everyday life and practice. For example, some have asked 'how to build a successful country in which people from all walks of life can find common cause with each other?' One answer, provided by historian Dame Anne Salmond, is to 'foster those institutions and activities that *bind us together* – kinship and family, voluntary and community organisations, sports and the arts, schools and universities, a pride in our shared heritage as New Zealanders.'³ Gatfield's woven wall waits for a moment in time when such an absorbing possibility will arise.

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³ *New Zealand Herald*, 3 March 2004, pg A19, (emphasis added)