



In April 2022, Aroha Novak interviewed artist Dame Robin White about her life and her memories of drawing and illustrating *Māori Legends: Some Myths and Legends of the Māori People*, which is celebrated in this exhibition.

Aroha Novak: **AN** | Robin White: **RW**

AN: When we first talked on the phone, I sent you some images of the illustrations (from *Māori Legends* published in 1969) so you could remember those images and remember that time.

I was wondering if you remembered that kind of process of being commissioned to draw for a book and that time at Bottle Creek, and the kind of interaction you might have had with a publishing company, and how you got commissioned to draw illustrations for this book, *Māori Legends*?

RW: First of all, I do remember the drawings now... I was doing a lot of drawing at the time, along with paintings and screen prints, and it was just a matter of remembering that particular collection of drawings for that particular book as distinct from other things that I'd been doing at the time. It all flooded back into my memory when I saw those images. Yes, I do remember doing them – as to the details around the commission – all I remember are conversations with my friends, which included Alistair Campbell – I don't recall anything else specific, other than just a conversation with Alistair Campbell around the idea and I can think back to that time and I can see myself sitting at the table and drawing those drawings, I remember exactly the circumstances, but then what happened to the drawings – to whom did I hand them once they were done? I have no memory of that.

AN: That's interesting –

RW: Just the making!

AN: I guess you would have moved on to your next project?

RW: I'm going to assume that they were done alongside whatever else I was doing in the form of painting. So these sort of drawings, they were like a sideline kind of thing I did occasionally when I was approached.

AN: I read that you had finished Art School in 1967, and then did a year at Teachers College so you were teaching part time (from what I read) at the same time this book came out, in 1969. Were you always aware that you wanted to become a full-time artist? How did you realise this, or when did you realise this and how did you make that happen for yourself?

RW: I don't know that I formulated that notion in quite that way, but the way it worked, really Aroha, is just from in accordance with my reality, which was that I was an independent, young woman, graduate of an art school and I needed to be able to pay the rent and feed myself and clothe myself and all of the other things that require money, so I always understood that – to start with anyway – I was going to have to have some form of occupation other than an art practice, but that whatever I did to earn money would be accommodated alongside the art practice, which would always be taking precedence ... if not in terms of my time, certainly in terms of my head, where I was at with my thinking and my intention. So to that end, I was at Teachers Training College, which was a requirement really because I had been at Art school on a what was called a studentship back then – financial support on the understanding that I would be a teacher for a period of time, so I spent 1968 at Teachers training college in Epsom, and I made use of that time to bone up on some skills that I had not acquired at Art school, so that's when I taught myself to screen print, because you know, the facilities were there, the materials, the time, and people whom I could bother – “How do you do this?” – and a few other things I tried, so that was a good learning experience being there. And then at the end of that year, I left Auckland, and my friend Sam Hunt had found a place for me to live, just more or less next door to where he was living at Bottle Creek on the shores of the Paremata Harbour, and I lived there for three years. The first year that I was there, 1969 I was teaching full-time, Mana College, Porirua. I was

one of two art teachers, myself and Sue Renner was the other teacher. The following year, 1970, I taught four days a week and had a three day weekend, and then the third year, 1971, I taught two days a week. Because by that time I had started to exhibit work, my work had started to sell, and I had enough income to be able to pay rent, feed myself, I was able to purchase a car – very cheap. I had independence, a means of transport and a lot more time to paint. So it was just simply responding to – it was a matter of continuing to work, making the adjustments in accordance with the way the income panned out ... basically pursuing an objective in a sort of systematic way, not trying to rush it, and it meant solid hard work. I didn't play around, I didn't waste time.

AN: I feel like you still have that work ethic.

RW: I'm somewhat driven!

AN: We found quite a few other drawings of yours from some of the School Journals from 1972 and 1973. I just was wondering if you could talk about how was it to be a woman artist starting out in that time, in the early 70s, and then how was it to be a Māori artist working in that era?

RW: I'll see if I can address both of those questions – because in a sense the answer is somewhat similar to both of those questions about being a woman art ist, about being a Māori artist. I think I'd like to start by just reflecting on being an artist and about art. Taking art and looking at it as a discipline and about creativity as an urge, as a power that exists in us as human beings, there is a sort of creative energy, an urge to create that's common to all us human beings. It's a capacity that we all have. And I think of that capacity, the capacity to create, as being liberating. And I think it is liberating from all sorts of things that can fence us in to feeling we have to be a certain way, or be confined within certain notions of who and what we are. I guess I am attracted to the universality of art as a human, creativity is a human attribute of capacity. So for that reason, I've resisted any labels. For example, when the feminist movement started to ramp up and gain momentum, I was often approached to represent myself as a woman artist... I never wanted to do that, really, it didn't feel right, I felt more at home in a

broader mainstream that included men and women. And I thought the same thing about, let's say, cultural and ethnic identity. I mean I was involved in the Māori artists and writers conferences when they first started off, and that was wonderful and that was at a time when you know, for many, it was a way of coming to terms with these things and finding out where we stood in relation to these issues. I felt I'm not just Māori, I'm also very much Pākehā of a very mixed nature – mostly Celtic – various kinds of Celtic infusions and you know in that spirit of honouring ancestors, I honour them all. So it's not something that I push, or that I would want to leverage on, if I can put it that way, because I think that would be dishonest in a way. It's very much part of me, my dad was very proud of his Māori heritage, and he expressed that heritage in ways that were natural to me. And they were to do with the way he related to the land and to the sea. His passion for growing kumara, which he learnt from his father, these kinds of things, his respect for language, for te reo, and the correct pronunciation, he wasn't a speaker but he always insisted that when speaking, when using Māori words, they must be pronounced correctly, you know these sound like small things but ...

AN: but small things add up to larger things –

RW: Yeah, because they stay with you. Those are things you learn as a child. Respect for language in general, just respect for the power of language, an openness to forming friendships with a wide variety of ethnicities, so we had friends who were Māori, Polynesian, Chinese. People of all different nationalities were in and out of our home.

So, in other words, I wasn't sitting down thinking to myself every morning "I am a Māori artist.

I'm an artist, my name is Robin White". If I am challenged, what is your core identity, I would say it is the fact that I am a Bahá'í. Because that kind of covers everything.



AN: I'm not familiar really with Bahá'í, but when did that come into your life?

RW: When I was two years old. My parents became Bahá'í's when I was two, 1948. And so I was just raised in a household where the kind of core concepts, about who we are as human beings, our relationship with our neighbours, with the world in general, our concerns for social issues, for justice and these kinds of issues. That was just a normal part of the kōrero in our home, with people coming and going, these were the sort of things that were discussed. World affairs. So it was ingrained in me, but it was a very small community in those days, it's much bigger now especially in Auckland, but Auckland in those days where we went to live when I was 4 years old, it was still a very small community then. And I didn't have other kids my age who were raised with these sorts of ideas, and so I guess I succumbed to peer pressure to a certain extent and during art school days, I was kind of away being a 60s girl and all that that might entail which we don't need to go into. But it was really when I left Auckland and became very serious about my work and thinking deeply about work, what it means and the precious gift of having a mind, having a vision, the sense of gratitude for that and the sense of needing to protect that from harmful things. I got to a point where I realised I needed to adjust my thinking and behaviour and so it was really during those years in Wellington, right at the end of the 60s, right at the beginning of the 70s, that I made that conscious decision to be a Bahá'í, not just to be born with that, but to actually be it, and for any Bahá'í, you have to come to that realisation at some point, it's not just something you inherit. You have to consciously say "Yes, I have thought about it as an independent thinking person, I've weighed it up and yeah this is the way to go." Does that make sense?

AN: Yeah, definitely. I've got another question which sort of relates to the previous one, the Māori Legends illustrations are obviously illustrating pūrākau, but within your own practice, did you think about your work as being Māori or representing that kind of Māori worldview?

RW: This is the difficulty around using words like myth ... when I think of these, let's say stories, these narratives, which have come down, come down, been handed down – this is beautiful. Just think,

what is the journey that these narratives have taken? Beautiful thing to think about really, that way in which as human beings we hand things on, we hand things on, it's a very lovely thing. And I like to look for where is that seed, where is the gem in this? I think for example of Māui, and capturing the sun. It all makes great sense to me. I mean, I'm not applying science in the way we think of as science but more in the sense of metaphor, of poetry and the truthfulness that poetry conveys, in the same way you see that poetry conveying truth in the way in which oratory is offered in the Māori sense. So symbols serve as a truth, the tūī, the call of the tūī, this is my heart speaking. And I think of the sun as being the source of light, of knowledge, of life and then capturing that to the purpose of us human beings – that's the story of humanity.

AN: Yeah... so we can see

RW: Yeah and not just see – see in our minds as well, understand. The symbolism of light is a powerful symbol which runs through all religions, the way in which humanity in all different places at different times has the light of knowledge. We just understand light as being revealed. Light is something that reveals things to us.

So I think of Māui as being this person that is lost in the hundreds of years of time – the nitty gritty of it, that's not important. I mean, after all, what the heck do we really know about Abraham and Moses other than their stories but certainly that was a reality, something happened and there was some thing, some person at the core of it somewhere that carried this truth, this new understanding. I don't know, that's just the way I think of these things, I don't dismiss them as myths, that doesn't help us in any way to understand why does this narrative persist, and where do we find the coherence with us now, our reality now, which is informed by science, science and our Pākehā understanding of it, which I don't see as being in any way opposite, it's a matter of finding how they work with each other, inform each other – it's a heck of a long-winded version...

AN: That's okay, I feel like this conversation about art being Māori or artists being Māori artists, it's a kind of murky area, there's a lot of people who identify as Māori artists and work very much where they



ILLUSTRATION: Tinirau and his pet whale

are trying to use mātauranga Māori in their practice, but it is something that is talked about a lot at the moment. But I always remember a quote from Ralph Hotere where he said that he wasn't a Māori artist, he was just an artist, and that is something that has always stuck in my head whenever I think about these conversations. Much like separating female artists from male artists, it's murky ground...

RW: Yeah, it can be contentious. It shouldn't be. If someone feels that way that's fine... when you're such a mix...it makes it a bit different.

AN: I like what you said about honouring all of your whakapapa ... not having a hierarchy maybe.

RW: I mean obviously the Māori ancestry that I have certainly does, in my heart, give me that sense of belonging in this land that is very special, but then other people have a sense of belonging here which is theirs as well. I can't say that I'm special. It's a funny thing, isn't it? We're so exercised about it. The thing is, the Bahá'í teachings have so shaped my thinking that these things don't worry me really. For example, Bahá'u'lláh who's the founder of the Bahá'í Faith says "the earth is but one country", the whole earth, "and mankind its citizens". When you think in that way, that is the world view of a Bahá'í.

AN: We are all humans!

RW: Yeah, we are one species, we have the same origin somehow, somewhere in the distant past, and we have all been out there roaming the surface of this planet and setting ourselves up over the many, many millennia and all those differences are beautiful, a beautiful tapestry we have woven. You know, long live the differences. Seeing the patterns, seeing how the patterns are woven is what interests me, and looking for the unity in that diversity.

AN: So, this particular exhibition that we're putting together, it is about highlighting Māori voices, perspectives and artists, and we're particularly looking at books within the Dunedin Public Libraries' reference collection. What do you think is important for children's books, or about children's books?

RW: Mmm, it's interesting. I like that question, and I had a few conversations with my husband, with my sister-in-law, one or two others. It's interesting how people have different opinions about, you know, what children's literature should be like. And then I also have the experience of what I was exposed to myself as a child, and what the benefits are that I reaped. What were the benefits to me of how I was introduced to literature, and the kind of literature that I was introduced to. And I think the thing that sits foremost in my mind, in my thoughts, in my hopes for children's literature is that it exposes children to beauty. I mean, the beauty of language, the beauty of thought and action so that ... it elevates their tender souls. You know, children are like these little tender plants that can bend and grow in any way they're influenced. They're really susceptible to influence. So, it's a powerful influence, isn't it, literature and books? And this is a means to influence children along the right path so that the potential for good within them is nourished and the potential for going the other way is inhibited because any child can go either way. So I think there's a huge responsibility to provide the best for children. I really dislike the idea of dumbing down and using language that kind of mimics street talk, because it's hip, because it's cool. And sometimes there is a place for that, but ... how does it contribute to refinement... and... yeah? And let's look at the experience of language in a traditional Māori context. Before Europeans came there was, you know, no written language, but children would have been exposed constantly to the finest form of poetry. Beautiful use of language. You don't even ... you don't have to understand te reo to understand that these are great artists who stand up on the paepae and... you just listen and it's just so thrillingly beautiful.

AN: It is, yeah. Poetry.

RW: Exactly.

AN: Thank you. I mentioned to you that it was inspiring to see an artist such as you, with such a long career, never stopping. And you said that you couldn't stop and the trick was to stay healthy. Do you have any other advice for younger artists aspiring to sustain a career, a long career, in the arts?

RW: It's just something that ... sustaining a career as an artist, well, let me think on that, Aroha, because the word 'career' is a stumbling block, as if I chose to do this. I didn't choose to have the capacity to be able to draw and to paint. It was given to me. I can't claim that for myself.

AN: What would you use instead of...?

RW: And so it's what I am. And it would make... it makes sense to be... to be what I am means continuing as an artist. And if that means having to do other things to survive, so be it. But it's something you carry with you all the time, because it's who you are. It's not what you do, it's who you are.

AN: It's what you are. It's not a career, it's a life.

RW: I mean, if you were to say, okay I want a career where I can be assured that I'm going to have this, this and this, and a nice house, and steady income, you'd never be an artist, ever.

AN: No way... no.

RW: But there's, you know, so the things that you usually associate with choosing a career, it's not a choice, really. It's a realisation that... it's just something that... a gradual dawning of a realisation of what you are. And it takes a while to evolve and to come to the surface and be understood. And when you're a child, it's just intuitive. I mean you're always drawing, always drawing. Always asking for paper or for drawing books and pens and pencils and paints. And then, at school ... doodling and absolutely loving it when we had to draw something in our exercise books. And then, getting to high school and discovering art rooms, and art is actually something I can do, you know? Yeah, so it was just a natural, naturally-evolving commitment. But I have to say, Aroha, I was extremely lucky, to have encountered along the way people who were very, very encouraging; who didn't say things like "Oh, forget it.", you know "Forget it, you're going to get married and have babies, and that's what you do.", you know, or "No, no, you've got to do this other thing because you'll never make money." I never had anyone tell me. My parents never did. They were very encouraging. You know, I was so lucky.

AN: Mmm, that's great, yeah.

RW: Wasn't it? It was amazing. So I really ... I owe an awful lot to the teachers, to my parents, and teachers that I had. The only thing I did that was any good was to take their advice and follow it. That's all.

We wish to acknowledge Robin White for her generosity, time and support of this kaupapa.

Kā mihi nui ki a koe Robin!

Illustrations by Robin White from *Māori Legends:: Some Myths and Legends of the Māori People*

ILLUSTRATION: Te Kanawa and the fairies

