

# b e c o m i n g – P a k e h a

Questioning the use of native birds in representation as a means of  
exploring New Zealand post-settler identity in visual art

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This exegesis is submitted to Auckland University of Technology for the Degree of Master of Art and Design

## Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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# Acknowledgments

To my wonderful husband John and daughters Jess and Emily, without whose love and support this project would not have been possible.

To Natalie Robertson, my primary supervisor. Your intelligence and sense of humour made learning easy. Thank you for the many hours you freely gave.

To my supervisor Moana Nepia. Your time and input to this project was greatly appreciated.

To Robyn, Bridget, Jane and Kate. You will now be able to drink your coffee in peace, without being dragged down to the studio for yet another critique.

To AUT University for the Full Fee Scholarship and second year Research Grant. The financial help made my attempt at this project possible.

Thank you to you all.

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# Abstract

## **becoming-Pakeha**

*Questioning the use of native birds in representation as a means of exploring New Zealand post-settler identity in visual art.*

The depiction of birds by artists such as Don Binney, Bill Hammond, Michael Parekowhai and Grant Whibley have served as metaphors in the conceptual systems of post-settler New Zealanders' expression of identity.

This project investigated unease in New Zealand post-settler identity and its dislocation from the past by considering works depicting native birds. Is depicting native - rather than introduced birds, an incongruous and romantic settler iconography in identity, leading to a re-telling of our place in this land at the expense of not only the rightful indigenous place of Maori, but of our own cultural becoming? By exploring the painting of birds as metaphors of New Zealand post-settler identity, the project aimed to contribute to the complex issues surrounding the entwined and entangled post-settler relationships of both the past and present.

This painting project investigated these issues through the medium of oil paint, culminating in a body of artwork presented in an exhibition with an accompanying exegesis representing 20% of the work.

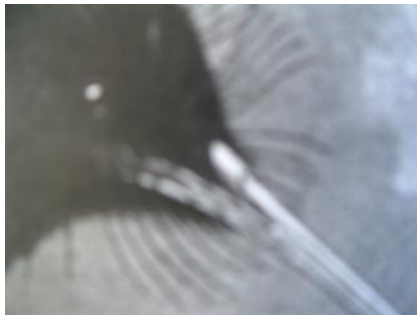
# Introduction

This project explored, through painting, the ways in which Pakeha artists use symbols such as native birds to express identity, which by doing so ignores the often uneasy history of how we came to be in this country. By identifying ourselves with a native species, rather than introduced, we act to displace the indigenous people who were already here.

Settler peoples have responded to the ‘problem’ of indigenous peoples and their own lack of ontological security in a number of ways across the full range from genocidal to assimilatory practices. On the symbolic terrain of identity construction the strategy that has received the most scholarly attention is the settler appropriation of indigenous authenticity to give substance and distinctiveness to their own nationalist identity claims. (Bell, 1999, p. 122)

The issues of post-settler identity were explored in this project under three main areas of interest, 1. the appropriation of indigenous authenticity; 2. qualities of representation in painting from the photograph, which opened meaning to simultaneously encompass past and present; 3. post-settler unease as expressed through a gothic style in New Zealand art.

I undertook this research from a personal orientation as a 5<sup>th</sup> generation European settler (Pakeha) who grew up in Wellington and is now living in Nelson. I used pronouns within this exegesis to own my place in the issues of post-settler identity, but not to speak without licence for the majority. It was a deliberate direction of the project as I aimed to make the expression of identity personal. The issues of calling myself Pakeha in this place were very different to that of other places such as Auckland, where the racial and cultural mixes are not only exponentially larger, but more diverse and evolving.



K. Wilkin-Slaney,  
*Untitled*,  
digital photograph,  
2007.

The project aimed to further and foster the process of becoming-Pakeha in identity for post-settler New Zealanders. As a Pakeha artist producing visual art that associates Pakeha with our own history and status as introduced people, in a country that already had an indigenous population, I aimed to contribute to greater openness and understanding about who we are. This project facilitated a more open and proactive dialogue from Pakeha about their relationship with their history and with Maori and their position and obligations as signatories to Te Tiriti O Waitangi, rather than waiting for Maori to act in defence of what position they can hold on to, in a minority, disadvantaged position.

-Where are you from?  
-I'm a Kiwi.

An exploration of the use of false symbols in identity was developed out of a curiosity about how post-settler New Zealanders describe themselves. The act of Pakeha calling themselves kiwis is located as a part of the glossing over of unsavoury, unpalatable aspects of the settler past, not only in post-settler dealings with Maori, but with the land and the New Zealand environment. Maori have clear concepts within their language and culture to express the idea of the past being present. This is revealed in the very first encounter of a stranger entering the Marae (meeting place), where the karanga – the call of welcome, acknowledges and clears a pathway for the spirits of the ancestors of both visitors and hosts. For Pakeha to accept and acknowledge their own past, a similar concept of past being present needed to be found. Photography provided a vehicle for this, both in the writing of French Philosopher Roland Barthes about how the past is evidenced in a photograph, and then with the question of what happens to the photographed image when it is painted, as demonstrated by Gerhard Richter and Shane Cotton.

Further investigation into the manner in which Pakeha visual artists express themselves revealed a dark sensibility or gothic style, which can be attributed to a post-settler unease. Although this could be linked to an international contemporary gothic movement, the project maps it as an expression of the underlying suppression of settler history.

## 1.0 NEW ZEALAND POST-SETTLER IDENTITY IN REPRESENTATION

K. Wilkin-Slaney,  
*Untitled*,  
digital photograph,  
2007.



Settler peoples are 'inauthentic' Others in relation to both the metropolitan/European and the indigene of the societies in which they live. They do not have ready access to a European identity. Nor are they able to easily claim an authentic belonging to and identity within their homelands....In addition they appropriate indigenous authenticity as a key figure in the assertion of their own cultural distinctiveness/authenticity. (Bell, 1999, p. 122)

The embodying of concepts, ideas and emotions in a symbolic form which can be transmitted and meaningfully interpreted is what we mean by 'the practices of representation'. Meaning must enter the domain of these practices, if it is to circulate effectively within a culture. And it cannot be considered to have completed its 'passage' around the cultural circuit until it has been 'decoded' or intelligibly received at another point in the chain. (Hall, 1997, p. 10)

This project was interested in the way in which Pakeha artists represent themselves through visual art. Work that depicts native birds as metaphors in identity produces and invites meaning for the Pakeha viewer that is understood because of the viewer's shared cultural language. In creating work that invites the reading of a native symbol as a sign of belonging for introduced people, if the uncritical viewer accepts this representation they become complicit in the reproduction of meaning in a self-perpetuating cycle.



## 1.1 POST-SETTLER UNEASE

September 1st 2008 signalled a final cut-off date for claims for compensation under Te Tiriti O Waitangi. The political discourse surrounding these issues ran parallel to this project. Identity for post-settler New Zealanders is influenced by their relationship to Maori through Te Tiriti O Waitangi and the history of their settlement. The dominant majority Pakeha settlers have held power since soon after the signing of the treaty in 1840 and the formation of nationhood. Although the Maori Chiefs who signed the treaty represented Maori interests in good faith, the representatives of the British Crown as the other signing party failed to uphold and honour their treaty obligations.

New Zealand social historians Avril Bell and Stephen Turner have written about the forgetting of history by post-settler New Zealanders. I concur with Turner when he wrote that:

White New Zealanders can hardly feel a sense of loss or separation, because their culture has been constructed in a variety of ways that enable them to forget or ignore the precariousness of their place and the painfulness of their past. (Turner, 1999, p. 22)

Trauma of settlement, as described by Turner, was experienced when settlers came to ignore and forget the past trauma of dislocation. This arose from the experience of coming to a strange land halfway around the world from original homelands and the resulting displacement of the original inhabitants in the 'new' land. They dealt with this unpleasant aspect of their becoming by creating a short history for themselves, beginning to count New Zealand history as commencing at the time of their new occupation, thereby creating a myth of natural occupancy. Turner (1999) suggests that unsettlement and forgetting has become a part of the psyche of today's post-settler culture, manifested in a weak sense of history, or a "white dreamtime" (1999, p. 22), requiring indigenous inhabitants to be overlooked in order to facilitate settlement.



K. Wilkin-Slaney,  
*Untitled*,  
digital photograph,  
2007.

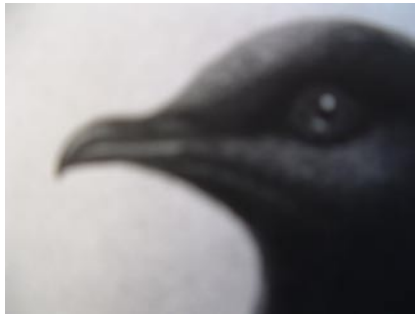
Fig. 1.1.1.  
Rita Angus, *Cass*,  
oil on canvas on board,  
370mm x 460mm, c1936.

It is often more comfortable for post-settler New Zealanders to ignore the consequences of past actions than to address the inequalities and injustices which have been enacted towards Maori. (However, it should be noted that this is not a broad-brush statement and this project acknowledged the Treaty claims process as a vital part of governmental steps towards addressing past grievances and land confiscations.)

Bell notes that although history writers “have produced substantial and detailed accounts of many aspects of the colonial relation and the injustices perpetrated against Maori” (Bell, 2006, p. 259), much academic work does not get published or circulated for the wider public, often only accessed through libraries by target interest groups. Through examining a survey of New Zealander’s knowledge of Te Tiriti O Waitangi, Bell (2006) concludes that although the respondents felt it was a good topic to know about, they actually knew considerably less than they asserted, with a majority of respondents acquiring what knowledge they had from the media.

Lack of knowledge of the past creates an underlying sense of uncertainty and unease within post-settler culture, which prevents an examination of historical issues. “Pakeha nationalism consequently depends more centrally on assertions of attachment to place than on narrations of history or of cultural distinction, while the history of how that attachment was secured is ‘forgotten’” (2006, p. 256). History would be better addressed than ignored if we are to bring about understanding of the imbalance of power between indigenous and introduced.

The development of the New Zealand Regionalist style in visual art expresses this attitude in the work of artists such as William Sutton and Rita Angus. The unpeopled landscapes have only the occasional settler buildings and structures to indicate people inhabiting the land. The indigenous population do not appear in these works, seeming never to have existed or left an imprint on these scapes.



K. Wilkin-Slaney,  
*3xUntitled (after Keulemans),*



digital photographs,  
2007.



## 1.2 PAKEHA IDENTITY OR BECOMING-PAKEHA

The use of the word Pakeha for naming settler New Zealanders is a contested issue. In general terms it is used to define the white settler partners of Te Tiriti O Waitangi against Maori in a binary relationship. According to social scientist Professor Paul Spoonley, being Pakeha is usually a “marker of someone who supports biculturalism as a way of moving forward and the need to offer reparations for historical wrongs” (Spoonley, 2007, p. 11). More recently post-settler New Zealanders have begun to use Pakeha to describe themselves in terms of their growing recognition of their own culture as distinctly different from the countries they emigrated from.

For those who are more ambivalent about the place and rights of Maori, Pakeha is a more problematic label to use: they prefer to call themselves New Zealanders. Furthermore it is perceived by some as a bi-cultural label for Europeans, rather than multi-cultural, not covering other ethnic groups who have immigrated to New Zealand. However, as Pakeha implies the non-Maori signatories of Te Tiriti O Waitangi, all non-Maori people who dwell in New Zealand and partake of the proceeds of that agreement (to be allowed to live here), could be encompassed by this term.

For those who choose to call themselves Pakeha, it can be a positive action to take, if as mentioned above, it is used to embrace the recognition of our relationship and obligations with Maori in positive terms, acknowledging past wrongs and accepting the consequences. If approached in this way it can be seen more as a verb than a noun - *becoming-Pakeha*, a term I have used to describe an on going and evolving relational state. This project embraced the name Pakeha. The works that were developed during this project sought to investigate and express the state of becoming-Pakeha.

The Kiwi is a flightless bird native to New Zealand. Appropriating native symbols, such as New Zealanders calling themselves Kiwis, helps to create nationalism – a sense of identity for the dominant group and a justification for the right to rule. The logic in describing themselves in such terms to other nations, is that it makes sense to identify themselves with a symbol which is unique to their own place, acting as a way of articulating

their uniqueness. A sometime popular T-shirt slogan reads: *Kiwi bloke. Eats shoots and leaves*. Pakeha have started to describe themselves as *Kiwis to themselves*.

Avril Bell wrote that this leads to the use of “appropriation of indigenous authenticity to give substance and distinctiveness to their own nationalist identity claims” (Bell, 1999, p.122). Settler people do not have a surety of identity, caught between their countries of origin and the indigenous societies of the places they have settled. To use the Kiwi as a symbol for who they are implies that they are like an endangered species evolved specifically for New Zealand. In describing post-settler New Zealanders as a native species, Pakeha risk viewing themselves as indigenous and losing their sense of responsibility for the actions of their ancestors. This attitude continues to displace Maori - the true indigenous people. This project has sought to contest the use of native birds to express post-settler identity and to explore how the use of introduced birds could better express becoming-Pakeha. The depiction of native birds by Pakeha is an example of the romanticising of origins. Using a species that was evolved to be here shields Pakeha from examining authenticity further, which a symbol that reflects colonial origins would have invited.

# Research in Practice

## INTRODUCTION

The following sections account for research in practice for the project, from ideas through to the painted image. This is discussed through three main areas, 1. methodology; 2. studio as research; 3. resulting work (*The Marvellous Machine*).

## 2.0 METHODOLOGY

This is a formal research project, as defined by Douglas, Scopa & Gray in their article *Research through practice: positioning the practitioner as researcher* (2000). Their premise that the intention to do research should be differentiated from the intention to realise an artwork, defined the basis for approaching this project, using “a methodology which is appropriate to the inquiry” (Douglas, Gray & Scopa, 2000, p. 2).

The primary methodological aim was to use artistic enquiry as research. To find out what that would mean for this project, the artistic processes already in use were analysed to articulate a methodology or methodologies. While this process pointed towards a predominantly reflexive system, coupled with a heuristic process of questioning, the difficulty of applying a systematic methodology to a creative practice led to a questioning of the notion of creative methodologies.

Shaun McNiff, in his book *Art-based Research* (1998), brought a fresh over-view to the question of methodologies in artistic inquiry as research through the discipline of art therapy. Art therapy usually investigates art through the observation of other artist's work, however McNiff, in looking at research from the point of view of the personal artistic inquiry of his post-graduate students, found himself questioning methodology from a fresh

perspective. He identified a need in the arts community for greater diverse research methods of artistic inquiry. Behavioural science methodologies traditionally used in art therapy were too limiting and the qualitative/quantitative dichotomy did not work, as creative art processes are empirical. “I do not see myself as a ‘hermeneutic researcher. Similarly, I am in sympathy with the values of phenomenological and heuristic inquiries, but I do not attach these labels to my way of viewing research” (McNiff, 1998, page 15). He identified the need to allow the development of new methodologies to come from within arts disciplines, rather than assuming models from other disciplines would automatically work.

In investigating what a methodology would be that comes from within this creative research project, a system was developed which mixed reflexive and heuristic practices together in a flexible, dialogical manner, allowing both systems to permeate the creative process by method, but also by instinct. Here in this documentation they are separated, but in practice they remained entwined, the heuristic questioning becoming a part of the reflexive pause.

Reflexive methodology was particularly useful in the form of reflection-in-action as discussed in *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983) by Donald Schon, who suggests “not only that we can think about doing but that we can think about something while doing it” (Schon, 1983, page 54). This involves letting the sense of surprise which comes from unexpected results create an opportunity to notice, pause, reflect and finally to take a new action. This action will take into account the unexpected and considers/tests/explores, with the creation of new questions and theories, in an ongoing cycle.

The examinations of material processes in paint were concurrent to the working through of ideas and concepts. The reflexive assessment of each stage was vital in informing the next, in an on-going and developmental manner. For successful outcomes, continually evaluating the process was vital to both indicate useful directions and ideas, as well as to identify un-useful ones. With thorough evaluation however, even directions that did not lead to final outcomes were still useful in the learning process, by finding out *why* they were unsuccessful.

As in Schon’s model, pauses in the production of works were taken to reflect on the direction the project was taking. Within these pauses questions were asked to examine the

project's current position. For example; "Have the questions been answered that were asked? Is this useful? Does the question need to change? Does the same question need to be explored further? Is the right question being asked?"

This is where heuristic methodology complimented the reflexive process, in the expectation that the research question would change. This kept the direction of the project moving, even when expected outcomes failed. It was important to remain open to the possibility of change and disruption, and plan for the unexpected. As the exact outcomes were not known until the end of the project, investigation and discovery needed to be the main concern, so that the unexpected and unknown was desirable and expected.

To facilitate this questioning approach, ongoing documentation was kept in a dialogical journal. This allowed the changing questions to be tracked without losing direction or control. In the journal responses and questions arising from the work were recorded, as well as the critiques, questions and suggestions of other viewers. The journal became a place to reflect during the pauses in production and a starting point for new directions.

### **3.0 METHOD**

This project focused on questions raised by New Zealand artists depicting birds, as well as the broader issues of painting the photograph, both conceptually and as applied to culture, as was considered in the following sections. The aim was to further explore their ideas, producing paintings that referred to and, as part of investigative experimentation, revisited aspects of their work.

### 3.1 BEGINNINGS

While visiting the workspace of tertiary students in Nelson in 2005, I was drawn to a painting of tuis on wallpaper. I felt the pathos of a native bird whose position in what remains of the New Zealand forest is tenuous. The work stayed in my mind as over the following months I noticed many Nelson artists were using native birds in their work. These artists were all pakeha. On reflection I could think of many more prominent Pakeha artists over recent years that had depicted native birds, yet I could only think of one depicting introduced birds. Why? The consideration of this question germinated the project.

As an artist my interest has always been with paint. I enjoy the contemporary approach of visual art that opens up artistic expression by questioning what *media* best represents ideas. However my own interest in making visual art resides in questioning how *painting* can best express ideas. I do not seek to be narrowly dogmatic in this approach, but rather to follow my area of interest as an artist.

### 3.2 NATIVE BIRDS AND POST-SETTLER IDENTITY

This section accounts for New Zealand artists who have employed the use of birds, both native and introduced in their practices. They were investigated to explore their different expressions and interpretations of post-settler symbols for identity. Of interest were artists who had an interest in Pakeha identity and more specifically, those who had used bird symbology in depicting identity.

Don Binney's work provides an example of the past use of native birds in post-settler identity. His practice commenced in the 1960s, depicting iconic and recognisable native birds above regionalist New Zealand landscapes, acknowledged both critically and, more recently by himself, as being concerned with national identity. He depicted native birds on a large enough scale to be anthropomorphic, which according to art historian Damian Skinner "captured the mood of the times, seeming to express a distinctive New Zealand identity" (Skinner, 2003, front inside cover). His post-settler audience also recognised this and could



Fig. 3.2.1.  
Michael Parekowhai,  
*Elmer Keith* (2000),  
Colour photograph (detail),  
1070mm x 1265mm, 2000.

associate viewing *our place* – the New Zealand landscape with *us* - the figure in the story of the painting (the native bird), this figure being the only character provided.

In 2000 Michael Parekowhai introduced a series of human-scaled photographs of sparrows, aiming to address the Maori – settler relationship, which was of direct interest to the issues of this project. The sparrows were an alien view of something familiar, speaking as metaphors for human issues, which invited the viewer to consider the sparrow and what it represents from an indigenous point of view. In these photographs the sparrow was not a neutral bird-next-door, but a colonising settler. The works invited post-settler New Zealander viewers to consider their own place in this country in the same light as the sparrow and all the events of history this encompasses.

Parekowhai's work is interesting in another way. His approach as an art-maker is to occupy many positions at once in his layering of meanings, as acknowledged by art critic and historian Justin Paton. "...The images won't be backed into [an] interpretation...Parekowhai's mobility, his talent for occupying many positions at once, registers" (Paton, 2002, p. 62). This allows for an opening of the binary of the indigenous/introduced relationship, where the viewer is invited to investigate the places in-between. This project investigated this approach to the production of meaning in the studio research, by considering the devices Parekowhai uses in his re-presentation of the familiar – for example scale, colour, context, cultural and historic associations, site and the juxtaposing of elements.

Through his jewellery practice, Warwick Freeman also explores entwined historical aspects of post-colonial culture. In the past he has made work that questions the ownership of cultural symbols. Of particular interest is his work *Dead Set* (2006), where he collected found dead animal parts of both native and indigenous species. He preserved them, catalogued and named each part in reference to museum practice, but presented all 121 parts as a group, native and introduced all together. As with Parekowhai the work is multi-layered in its levels of meaning, but also as a piece the group speaks in a very different way than its individual parts. Freeman combines composite pieces in groups quite conscious of how this can change meaning. In an earlier series *Sentence* (1998-2001) he combined individual pieces of jewellery in horizontal rows, alluding to words written in a sentence and how meaning can change with each different position or juxtaposition of the individual 'words'.

Fig. 3.2.2.  
Warwick Freeman,  
*Dead Set (2)*,  
oxidised silver and animal  
parts, Dimensions variable,  
2002.

Fig. 3.2.3. Grant Whibley,  
*Te Tohu*, oil on canvas,  
1370mm x 1826mm, 2002.

His intention was that the viewer would read the work in terms of the relationships between the pieces as well as the whole.

In combining both native and introduced species in one work, Freeman opened up a direction for this project to consider, rather than only working with introduced birds. Introduced birds on their own can seem to speak less of the tensions of introduction than when they are seen with the species they displace. The native species also define place.

Grant Whibley paints large-scale images of New Zealand native birds, some extinct, taken from photographs of stuffed birds in museums. The scale confronts the viewer from their own size and eyelevel, creating an anthropomorphic reading. The birds have a potential to be used as a conduit for a message or issue, as their gaze is neutral, (birds lack the ability for facial expression) – thereby appearing intense, even forceful, but equally passive - depending on what the viewer reads into it. The bird is usually cropped within the composition so that its head is predominant, emphasising the gaze and inviting the viewers to bring their own interpretation. Whibley makes reference in his choice of image to the tension of the effects of colonisation, while at the same time rendering the birds in such a way as to leave meaning open to interpretation.

### 3.3 METHOD IN PRACTICE

Photographic images were gathered as a practical starting point to find out how they could be represented in paint. The materiality of the supports and surfaces was explored, testing work that used ambiguous space, and how this seemed to open up and un-define meaning. Initially texture was used in the support to test whether the texture reminded the eye of the materiality of the surface, preventing it from receding into the illusion of a picture plane. Tests revealed that the texture reminded the eye of the work's materiality, the sense of ambiguous space was one-dimensional, rather than ambiguously or infinitely dimensional as in Shane Cotton's work, ref. Section 4.4. Further investigation of Cotton's work, fig. 4.4.1 & 2, revealed he was using a dark painted ground, subtly tonally textured, but without obvious physical texture (other than the canvas) to draw the eye in. This gave no clue of depth. To create less definitely infinite ambiguous space in my own work, a dark ground was tested with a fine matt texture, whose materiality could only be subtly perceived, so that depth was not infinite, but still undefined. This shortened ambiguous space suited the aim towards work that remained undefined.

A wide range of bird images were gathered using the camera as a drawing and recording tool. The resultant photos were developed into figurative images for painting. Of particular interest was the gaze of the birds, the consideration of which was raised in the work of Whibley. The expressionless bird faces were cropped and zoomed in on to test how to depict a neutral gaze, which could keep meaning open. An atmosphere within the work that hinted at meaning was sought, while concurrently providing room for broader interpretation. If the aforementioned underlying post-settler unease was to be accepted as true, then its presence might push viewers to a gut level interpretation, even if it could not be consciously understood. The aim was to draw the viewer towards questions arising out of this. Here were introduced bird figures without indigenous status – maybe like me. How does that feel? What does that mean?

To explore the representation of meaning in bird images, the work of Freeman was investigated by making multiple small works, refer appendix A (ix & xi). Both photographs and paintings of photographs were used to create groups and strings of images, referring to

Freeman's *Sentence* (1998-2001) works. These were rearranged around each other within the composition, to find out how the birds contrasted with each other in different positions, trying to keep the production of meaning open in the same way as Freeman. Images were sought where the viewers could see something familiar of themselves. Rather than "that's a beautiful bird, I wish I was like that," the response sought was "that's an interesting image or work, it reminds me of myself."

### 3.4 BIRD IMAGES



Fig. 3.4.1.  
K. Wilkin-Slaney,  
*Untitled (After Keulemans)*,  
digital photograph,  
dimensions variable, 2007.

A starting point for gathering bird images was in *Buller's Birds of New Zealand* (1967), describing itself in the title page as *a history of the birds of New Zealand by Sir Walter Lawry Buller*. Originally published at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, it was re-published in 1967, being still widely recognised as a leading work depicting native birds. It contains notes on the now controversial capture, killing and recording of native birds by Ornithologist Sir Walter Buller as well as lithographs of the birds by John Keulemans – prominently influential in Hammond's bird paintings. Time was spent photographing and exploring these lithographs because of their significance in the depiction of New Zealand native birds. Birds appropriated from Keulemans' images were placed alongside introduced birds, testing whether introduced birds would need a native to anchor them to this place. Otherwise birds such as sparrows could be referring to just about every continent. Initially there was no fixed interest in one particular species; common species familiar in everyday life were sought such as blackbirds, starlings and sparrows.

An approach used by both Whibley and Fiona Pardington has been to photograph stuffed native birds from museums. In conversation with their work, stuffed introduced birds were photographed from the Nelson Provincial Museum collection. Further field photographs of introduced birds narrowed my interest to sparrows, which appeared in city, suburban and country life, making an ideal 'every-bird'.

The house sparrow (*passer domesticus*) was first introduced to New Zealand in 1866 by the Wanganui Acclimatisation Society. Of interest to this project was that Sir Walter Buller himself was one of the society's promoters for the sparrow's introduction. Over the next five years as few as 100 birds were introduced. Their success is observed In the *Atlas of Bird Distribution in New Zealand 1999-2004*, where the only areas of New Zealand that house sparrows were not observed were mountainous regions such as Ruapehu, Hikurangi and the Southern Alps.

The introduction of sparrows was to help facilitate settlement by eating the pests and insects that were eating early crops. Once introduced they quickly multiplied, to the point where they became a pest to the settlers, eating their crop seeds etc. Globally they populate wherever European settlement goes, rather than moving into the forests and wilder places of new lands.

The painting of bird bones was explored as a further investigation into bird imagery. As the only bird bones readily available for purchase were on the Internet in America - with the attendant import difficulties of bio-security, the extraction of bones from found dead birds was attempted. With no sparrows conveniently dropping dead on the lawn, the next best source of dead birds was a friend who had a finch in her freezer. Bracing myself for the grizzly task, I plucked and boiled the bird in the hope that the meat would come away from the bones with a long cooking time – much like simmering a chicken for stock. Not only did this not happen, but the long cooking time dissolved the skull which was one of the main bones of interest. The remains were a sad collection of tiny bones covered with little scraps of dried meat like some kind of fairies' Kentucky Fried left-overs.

Concurrently I concentrated on continuing the photographing of sparrows, gathering a large and diverse collection of images.

### 3.5 PAINTING THE PHOTOGRAPH

Painting the photograph for the project was informed in two ways. Firstly the critical ideas and interpretation of meaning, in both the photograph and the act of painting the photograph. Secondly the physical rendering of a photographed image in paint.

The project sought to express the past entangled with the present, as a device to redress the notion of forgotten history in post-settler unease. The English language provides no simple word for the concept of both past and present being able to exist simultaneously, however the possibility is acknowledged in grammar. “In English, the present perfect has perfect aspect, which means that it is used to refer to a subject's past actions or states while keeping the subject in a present state of reference or in a present state of mind” (Wikipedia, 2008, no page ref.).

Roland Barthes discussed the opening up of time and space in representation in his book *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography* (1980).

The Photograph does not call up the past... The effect it produces upon me is not to restore what has been abolished (by time, by distance), but to attest that what I see has indeed existed... What I see is not a memory, an imagination, a reconstitution, a piece of Maya, such as art lavishes upon us, but reality in a past state: at once the past and the real. (Barthes, 1980, p. 82)

By contrast a painting can represent a moment in the past, but is a construction formed over a period of time using memory, imagination and reconstitution. It is not chemical evidence of an actual moment.

The differences in presence between the photograph and the painting were developed in the work of Gerhard Richter through his painting practice from the end of the 1960s. Richter made an investigation into the viability of painting in history after the photograph, commencing at the point in modernist history where the question of the end of abstract

Fig. 3.5.1.  
K. Wilkin-Slaney  
*Blackbird*,  
oil on muslin on board,  
210mm x 270mm, 2007.



painting was being contemplated. Art critic and lecturer in philosophy Peter Osborne suggested his paintings were posited *after* photography and *in the manner of* photography. However, importantly his agenda was to *paint* and not to move into new media as much of the art world was doing at the time. Richter's paintings were affirmations of painting by being paintings. This approach gave substance to the aims of this project, which were also to remain within the discipline of painting.

As a result of his investigations into painting the photograph, Richter took Roland Barthes' ideas of what the photo did to time and presence, and embedded this into painting and representation. This opened up considerations of "proximity and distance" (Osborne, 1992, p. 104), which was of temporal significance for painting because of their crafting *in* space and time and concurrently by their conceptual depiction *of* space and time.

These ideas are further demonstrated and developed in the work of New Zealand painter Shane Cotton, not just in the ideas behind painting the photograph, but also for painting as an expression of identity. Cotton's practice engages with both the issues of contemporary western art, Maori history and the intersection of Maori and post-settler culture. This project focused on aspects of contemporary painting practice in his work sited in western art history, but acknowledged that this is but one aspect of his work and ideas. It is through the rendering of his surfaces with their visual, non-representational form that he is able to create ambiguous space (where the depth of field is undefined) in his backgrounds, even though his finished works remain representational. This marriage of non-representation and the painted photographic image is how temporality in his works can remain open. Ambiguous space is blended with presence of the past in the painting of photographic images, creating undefined space and time.

In Cotton's recent work, this project identified his engagement with problems similar to those that Richter had also addressed, working through issues of temporality in painting. Rather than working from one photographic image as Richter had done, Cotton works onto a flat ground of ambiguous space, painting a range of images in this space without physical reference to each other, juxtaposing the various times in history each image represents. Curator Victoria Lynn says of his work: "The space surrounding the forms is as significant as the imagery itself. The space is bodily. It is a void into which the viewer is invited to

Fig. 3.5.2.  
Shane Cotton, *Play*,  
acrylic on canvas,  
1800mm x 1500mm, 2006.

Fig. 3.5.3. Shane Cotton,  
*Begin (detail)*,  
acrylic on canvas,  
1900mm x 3000mm, 2006.

conceptually ‘leap’...a space for perception, reflection, isolation and resonance” (Lynn, 2007, p. 2). Like Richter, his works appeared to this project to be both *in* and *of* space and time.

Cotton works with an interest in biculturalism and the issues of indigenous and introduced. His work uses images gathered from regions of Maori and colonial history, culture and modern life. Cotton’s method is to work over a ground made of a dark mostly even hue, which creates the ambiguous space. In the multiplicity of his sources and meanings, darkness can refer to the fecund wealth of earth and life of Maori genealogy and history, while at the same time indicating his engagement with western art. As described by Justin Paton, the work makes “another black painting in the lineage that runs from Kasimir Malevich through the American Ad Reinhardt and into New Zealand art history via Ralph Hotere” (Paton, 2000, p.2).

He lays his images over the ground of ambiguous space without reference to depth – as if floating. His images are representations of photographs, or photographically real depictions of birds in freeze frame, Maori cultural artefacts and devices from modern culture such as the play symbol from a D.V.D. player. Some images, such as a mokomokai are painted as if looming out of the background, so that it is at once a part of ambiguous space and at the same time separate and present.

This embedding of temporality in the painting demonstrates Cotton’s knowledge of and interest in the issues of contemporary painting. Where he takes the ideas of Richter further is in his exploration of his methods to express political, cultural and historical ideas for Aotearoa New Zealand. He uses his painting to bring his concerns into the realm of addressing and confronting both history and presence. Art critic Blair French (2007) wrote that Cotton’s work speaks of life and death, and of presence in death which leads to the sublime. He sees presence as unusual in contemporary painting, as the sublime usually resides in technological work of “shock and awe” (French, 2007, p. 12). He views the paintings as both depicting presence and reducing presence. This allows for meaning to move across historical, cultural and conceptual boundaries. The positioning of Cotton within the discourse of the justification and direction of contemporary painting was critical to this project. It gave shape and direction for enquiries in paint, while addressing similar cultural



and historical concerns. This project sought to investigate further the depiction of presence as it moves across, historical, cultural and conceptual boundaries, acknowledging how entwined these things are.

### 3.6 DRAWING WITH THE CAMERA

A wide range of bird images were gathered using my camera as a drawing tool. The resultant photos were developed into figurative images in paintings.

In early experiments the photographs were re-photographed, developing a process that reduced and enlarged the image towards a result that lacked focus or became a little erased. This was to push them towards a point where they lost meaning, without actually *reaching* that point, so that the question or meaning could remain open.

In the work *Rock Pigeon* (2007), figure 3.6.1, a painting was made of a black and white photo that had been enlarged and became blurred. These photographic elements were carried into the painting – the black and white tone, framing, cropping and lack of focus. This was to test whether the viewer could be made conscious that not only was the painting depicting an image that is present (the painting), but at the same time it was evoking a sense of the image *having-been-there* (the photographed source image), in the interpretation of the ideas of Barthes. In subsequent experiments using more painterly, textured, and coloured grounds than *Rock Pigeon*, the work's link to a photographic style grew weaker, and therefore its ability to express presence as described above questionable.

Through further exploration of photos of introduced birds, the technique of painting in imitation of stereotypical formats of the photograph in the exploration of depicting presence was continued. A rectangular composition was used in reference to the photograph



Fig. 3.6.1.  
K. Wilkin-Slaney,  
*Rock Pigeon*,  
oil on muslin on board,  
400mm x 1200mm, 2007.

and the palette was kept black and white, continuing to play with painting an out of focus image that made the images suggestive but uncertain.

### 3.7 BLACK AND WHITE

Although the photographic format had been investigated to this point, in reviewing the resulting work as part of the reflexive process, an atmospheric shift was identified in the resulting works. The removal of colour from the palette was producing a dark moody sensibility. In focusing on the gaze of the birds, background imagery had been removed from the compositions, creating a flattened, depthless picture plane, which in itself was ambiguous. By putting the photographic considerations to one side, these works were creating an atmosphere that well expressed the unease of post-settler history and identity. The use of black and white could be associated with the Victorian photographs of early settlers. Or it could be seen as a dark sensibility. Gothic even.

To develop this atmosphere further in the project and make the work more personal, the photographic framework needed to be put aside while considering a move to a more painterly direction. The appearance of a gothic atmosphere did not rise from a decision to work in that style, but rather from the need to develop a means to express the increasing ideas arising from the on-going research. Gothic was not interesting in an horrific or macabre sense, but rather to create an atmosphere of dark sensibility, as observed in New Zealand contemporary gothic style that expresses post-settler unease.



Fig. 3.7.1.  
K. Wilkin-Slaney,  
*King of the Kawakawa (detail)*,  
oil on muslin on board, 2007.

Fig. 3.8.1.1.  
David Altmejd, *Untitled*,  
mixed media,  
dimensions variable, 2007.

### 3.8 NEW ZEALAND CONTEMPORARY GOTHIC IN VISUAL ART

This section accounts for a New Zealand gothic sensibility in visual art that expresses a post-settler unease.

#### 3.8.1 Contemporary Gothic

The term gothic was first used to describe 5<sup>th</sup> century European Goth tribes, and then later medieval architecture. However the modern gothic term is derived from 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century gothic literature. These were stories of suspense or romance, centred on themes of death and the macabre, ghosts and the supernatural, family secrets and hidden horrors. Skulls, werewolves, vampires, and monsters featured, often within the backdrop of a medieval castle.

Contemporary gothic art developed across many western cultures during the early 1990s. Gilda Williams, editor of *The Gothic. Documents of Contemporary Art* (2007) suggests that “‘Gothic’ in contemporary art is necessarily a partial term which serves mostly to identify a peculiar, dark sensitivity shared by the artist and the observer who has chosen to respond to the work in this manner” (Williams, G., 2007, p. 13). Gothic is not a specific movement as many of the artists whose work has a gothic appearance would not align themselves with this term.

A distinct difference can be drawn between this dark sensibility and the uncanny, which is more accidental, or the grotesque, which is mostly figurative, but contemporary gothic does borrow from both, often using elements of horror, lust, the repulsive and the disgusting. “Unlike the abject, the Gothic is cultured, sensual and

Fig. 3.8.1.2. Christian Holstad,  
*Held hearts and bated breath*,  
pencil on newspaper,  
155mm x 230mm, 2005.

affected. The abject is neglected, the Gothic refined, the abject is filthy, the Gothic merely cobwebbed or dusty” (Williams, 2007, page 14). This could be seen as a result of the roots of gothic being entwined in romance, rather than narratives of horror.

Contemporary gothic appeared in reaction to the rise of new technologies and the ever increasing magnitude of high end production, however it can also be more recently linked with reaction to the rise of conservative fundamentalism post 9/11, or simply with the increase in the sameness of the mass production/mass consumption of global culture. Shamin Momin, curator of the 2004 Whitney Biennial wrote that “ultimately they seek the extremes of human experience lost in the emotional ‘blanding’ holding contemporary society in its grip” (Momin, 2004, p.51). In history gothic art was seen to arise in reaction and opposition to the enlightenment, and since has arisen after any conservative or repressive periods associated with booms of mass consumption.

Contemporary gothic is opposed to the sensibilities of modernity, looking back rather than forward, shadowed rather than clear. Gothic has been used as a term for other or opposition, darkness, death and cruelty. A particular Gothic device is to contrast opposites such as good and evil, sanity and madness, innocence and corruption, exposing cultural pretences around societies’ conventional attitudes. As these layers are peeled back, disturbing hidden forces are revealed.

### 3.8.2 New Zealand Gothic

New Zealand contemporary Gothic in visual art is viewed by this project as more than a local development of the international trend. It appears as an expression of the existing underlying condition of cultural unease already discussed in section 2. Mishka Kavka sees gothic in kiwi culture as an expression of the suppressed histories of settlement “where an undead history meets unsuccessful efforts at its repression” (Kavka, 2006, page 57). In 1995 a name for this was brought prominently to public light in the title of Sam Neill’s film *Cinema of Unease* (1995). Neill acted as a

Fig. 3.8.2.1. Colin McCahon,  
*Otago Peninsula (Kenedy)*,  
oil on board,  
1200mm x 2440mm, 1946-9.

catalyst for a growing public awareness of a gothic sensibility in the arts that had been sensed, but not yet widely discussed.

Gothic elements had already been seen in New Zealand painting before the international movement of the 1990s. Colin McCahon's much painted Otago peninsular or Takaka hills could easily be the sites of a gothic haunting. What is removed lurks out of sight, gone but not forgotten. At the same time his work could also be seen as an expression of the view of land as a site of natural occupancy. Tony Fomison worked with the gothic image throughout his practice, although Fomison's haunting was more of a personal journey than a cultural sensibility. Alexis Hunter's work is often gothic, but she has not developed the larger body of her work within the New Zealand context.

During the 1990s an increase can be seen in gothic sensibility in New Zealand art. This corresponds to the overseas trend, the already mentioned issues of an increase in the reaction to modern consumptive and conformist consumer culture can be drawn on to explain this. However, more specifically for post-settler New Zealanders, an awareness of their own history was starting to grow out of the 1980s. The political and cultural profile of Maori was gaining prominence in the dominant settler culture's radar through such issues as treaty settlements and the international success of the Te Maori exhibition. There began to be an increasing looking inward, towards less savoury New Zealand history through artistic questioning.

When an artist creates new work that explores the past, as with most things suppressed or hidden, it eventually starts to intrude with a life of its own. In a sense to haunt the work, creating a gothic undertone, as can be seen in the work of Michael Shepherd. Unpalatable events of New Zealand colonial history which had been hidden in the closet and buried in the garden were leaking out.

Painter Bill Hammond had already been toying with the grotesque and the macabre in the 1980s. His well-documented trip to the Auckland Islands in the early nineties and his consequential unearthing of the history of Sir Walter Buller's ornithological deeds with native birds, created a series of paintings that evoke a history-haunted presence. The resulting paintings aren't usually dark in the sense of the use of black and reduced light, (although in *Buller's tablecloth* (1994) he does do this), but they have a haunted aspect.

Fig. 3.8.2.2.  
Bill Hammond,  
*Watching for Buller*,  
oil on canvas,  
1000mm x 1200mm, 1993.

Fig. 3.8.2.3.  
Shane Cotton, *Hopa*,  
oil on canvas,  
1830mm x 1520mm, 1998.

Fig. 3.8.2.4.  
Laurance Aberhart,  
*Moreporks. (Bird Skins  
Room #2), Taranaki St.,  
Wellington 3*,  
black and white photo,  
October 1995.

They explore death and loss, reincarnating native bird people in a contemporary society, which are spirit-like, mystical and unearthly.

Cotton also has an interest in history, as discussed in section 4.4, investigating the events and outcomes of cross-cultural interactions between Maori and Pakeha, often representing or referring to unsavoury events in colonial history, deliberately choosing darker palettes for expression. The darkness can refer to elements of Maori culture and symbology, but it also makes a stark atmosphere, with ochres creating a sense of age. The images used are not grotesque or macabre, but a dark sensibility is evident in the underlying associated historical events and emotions implied but not shown that haunt the work.

Cotton's more recent work is not shocking or horrific, yet it still has a gothic sensibility. The floating figures appear almost as mystical apparitions, suggesting connections to things unseen, mixing both the present and the past. His work demonstrates a knowledge of and interest in the issues of contemporary painting, but at the same time he uses painting to address and confront history, continuing with a dark presence haunted by its past.

Photography demonstrates a larger body of New Zealand gothic work than painting. The photographic image already investigates the history of the place and people they capture simply by presenting that *particular* image. When the photographer further chooses to specifically investigate histories, the photograph can become a powerful image of New Zealand gothic. David Craig describes Gothic's sensibility as anti-realist, but often with an accompanying scientific investigation or observation of the supernatural. Picture in the gothic novel the sceptical narrator beginning as a detached observer, but being drawn more personally into increasingly fantastical events as they unfold. According to Craig, photography allows for this initial seemingly scientific depiction, while never ultimately allowing for demystification. "Photographic reproduction delivers images to the masses via the media, but in doing so they mess with scale, colour, and numerous other auratic, even sublime, elements" (Craig, 2006, p. 47). The photo also allows for the capturing of what is beyond reach in comprehension, such as scale or distance or even the sublime and brings it down to a viewable, more domestic scale.

Fig. 3.8.2.5.  
Ann Shelton, *Villa #5*,  
*Formerly Lake Alice Hospital*  
*Wanganui, New Zealand*,  
C type print, diptych,  
720mm x 900mm each, 2004.

Finally, a mention should be made of some films that investigated New Zealand history (fiction or non-fiction) with a dark sensibility during the 1990s. These include *The Piano* (Campian, 1994), Peter Jackson's *Heavenly Creatures*, and *In My Father's Den* (McGann, 2004). These films show further examples of a gothic atmosphere, appearing as an expression of the underlying unease in attitudes and events of colonial history that seem to haunt the work by association.

### 3.9 WHAT IS A PAKEHA SYMBOLOGY FOR IDENTITY?

What would it be like to see sparrows in works painted by Pakeha? How could these works reflect through the depiction of sparrows and their activities the artist's ideas about Pakeha identity? In investigating these questions, images of native birds were placed next to introduced ones, testing whether this binary was needed in order to be clear with the viewer that the work was specifically about New Zealand. However as the work developed, the original aim of the project, which was to challenge the appropriateness of Pakeha artists using native birds as symbols in identity, became questionable.

The use of native birds by Pakeha artists was an easy target in questioning of appropriation, however on closer investigation the 'rights' and 'wrongs' of the practice were not clear. Francis Pound in his essay *Walters as Translator* (1993) discussed the connectedness of original works with their translations (Walters, 1993), and the complexities of the cultural interweavings these works express, without being to the detriment of the original. "The "consumption", if consumption there is, partakes of the vast and irrecoverable intertext of the visual culture – both art and non-art visual culture – of the whole turning world" (1993, p. 37).

Nor was it proving an appropriate answer to simply extract the use of native symbols from settler culture use. So how could place be depicted? Should the introduced birds speak of place on their own? How could they speak of this place, my place – Nelson? A new exploration began which was sourced by observation, photographic imagery, memory and imagination. If the images were to be more expressive of personal place, accepting that native and introduced need not be separated, what would they depict? Kawakawa (*macropiper excelsum*), a small native New Zealand tree that is abundant in Richmond, became the foremost choice, expressing an everyday visual experience.

The common prevalence of both sparrows and kawakawa is quickly observed in Nelson. Kawakawa also has a meaningful place in Maori culture and traditions for its many medicinal and edible qualities, its symbology of life and death and its use in the removal of tapu – to make the sacred (tapu) safe. The use of kawakawa as a support for the sparrow





Fig. 3.9.1.  
K. Wilkin-Slaney,  
*Deck the Kawakawa*,  
oil on muslin on board,  
400mm x 1200mm, 2007.

images potentially created a tension in the question of intent for the New Zealand viewer, through their own local knowledge of kawakawa. What does it mean when sparrows manipulate/use a native plant?

The first work using kawakawa, *Deck the Kawakawa* (2007), figure 3.9.1, provided an image for the introduced bird that evoked place. The out of focus blackbird figure appeared to be ghostlike in contrast to the focused images of branches and birds in bubbles, rendered in ambiguous space to keep meaning open, while pushing the work towards a more personal rendition of ideas in the subject matter.

Although extraordinarily time consuming to paint, in *King of the Kawakawa* (2007), refer appendix A (xiii), the uncanny was exploited in the resemblance that the kawakawa stick has to a bird bone. Through this a multi-layered atmosphere was created in both time and space in the pile of 'stick-bones', with birds both native and introduced embedded throughout the work. Kavka (2006) reveals the ideas expressed here in her writing around gothic in kiwi culture. She views it as an expression of the suppressed histories of settlement "where an undead history meets unsuccessful efforts at its repression" (2006, p. 57). This work attempted to reveal undead history.

Contrasting focussed/blurred images were explored in paint, in the further investigation of atmosphere and expression beyond photography. The expression of post-settler New Zealand identity through gothic fantasy was also of interest to the project. The short focus of depth that had been used to create ambiguous space in considering presence could also be read as emphasising the short history of contemporary gothic.

After further tests of inclusions and exclusions of native birds and then kawakawa, it was confirmed that in order to define these works as being of *New Zealand*, a reference image was needed alongside the sparrows that was distinctly of this place – a native image. This illustrated the premise that the relationship between native and introduced, Maori and Pakeha is entangled, both past and present, and cannot be separated out.

## 4.0 THE MARVELLOUS MACHINE

This section accounts for the development of the final work entitled *The Marvellous Machine*, refer appendix B.

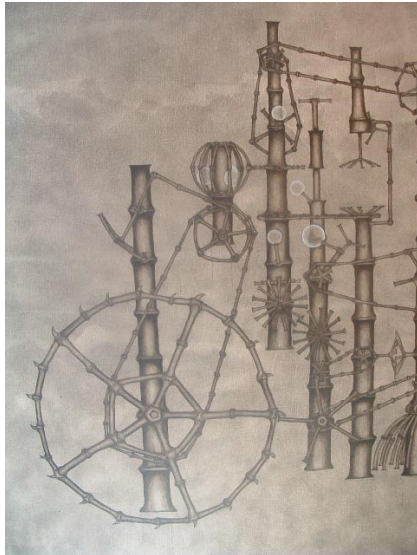
A significant development for the project came when the idea for a large work that depicted birds in real-life scale was developed. The project did not aim to force an anthropomorphic reading in large-scale bird figures such as in the work of Whibley or Parekowhai. The work *King of the Kawakawa* (2007) had shown that using life-like scale in depicting small birds was less obvious in inviting anthropomorphic identification, allowing for a more subtle and open interpretation.

A large work would create a picture plane that would enfold some of the viewer's peripheral vision, creating a sense of life-scale industry for the activity of the birds. This spawned the idea for a colonial industrial machine, which would be constructed from the kawakawa by the sparrows. As an expression of settlement, it would not be required to be a replica of an actual machine, but rather to simply give a *sense* of machinery. In fact, to refer to settler history by reflecting on the unpalatable aspects of settlement, the machine could well be a mechanism made without obvious purpose.

A large time frame was required for the painting – around 3 – 4 months. Although still achievable within the parameters of the project, the question arising from a work that would take the rest of the year to complete was how to maximise research in practice by maintaining flexible development to the end of the project. To address this, small works were developed alongside the large work to investigate ideas as they grew out of the large work. The contrasts in scale were a complimentary dynamic in the final exhibition and the intention was to treat the large and small paintings as one work.

To personalise the work and make it more explorative and expressive of the developing ideas, a more imaginative and fantastical approach was continued, which had begun with the bird bubbles in *Deck the Kawakawa* (2007) and *King of the Kawakawa* (2007). Following this, made-up constructions had been created from the kawakawa. Firstly

Fig 4.0.1  
K. Wilkin-Slaney,  
*work in progress*,  
oil on canvas,  
1800mm x 2100mm, 2008.



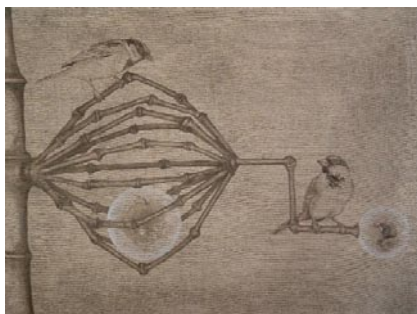


Fig. 4.0.2.  
K. Wilkin-Slaney,  
*Winding Mechanism*,  
oil on muslin on board,  
210mm x 270mm, 2008.

Fig. 4.0.3.  
K. Wilkin-Slaney,  
*Untitled*, oil on muslin,  
100mm x 100mm, 2008.



as prison-like bars containing the birds, appendix A (xiv), then developing further into *Birdcage* (2008), appendix A (xvi), where the kawakawa was shaped into a form (cage) controlled by the sparrow. If the birds were the manipulators of the kawakawa in some kind of construction/industrial activity, this could be used as a metaphor for portraying settlers in empire building in a manner that alluded to a New Zealand experience, satisfying an aim of the project in providing post-settler New Zealanders with introduced birds as a metaphor for themselves.

The resemblance of kawakawa sticks to bird bones continued as a useful metaphor in the kawakawa/bird relationship, as the stick litter under the trees resembled piles of bird bones. This was arranged in layers to evoke a sense of time having passed, alluding to past as well as present.

In earlier paintings such as *Watching/Waiting* (2008), appendix A (xv), the dark flat background had been developed as an empty ambiguous space. Cotton's work uses dark ambiguous space in reference to life and fecundity of Maori genealogy and tradition. By contrast *The Marvellous Machine* uses dark ambiguous space that is empty. This could describe the Pakeha experience, which lacks the clear inheritance of the past and speaks of the unease in forgetting history. To describe further how this makes it difficult to move forward as a culture, the mechanism was planned to be static and ultimately unproductive to invite Pakeha audiences to reflect honestly on themselves and their own past

The small works were used to depict imaginary aspects of mechanisation – kawakawa levers, cogs and structures, the previously developed bubbles as well as sparrow personalities in bird-scale portraits. Still working stylistically with a black and white palette, the combination of the bubbles (which had originally contained native bird images) and sparrow portraits were combined. This created the look of a Victorian bubble glass frame, but could also refer to the circular shape of the photographs produced by the first Kodak camera of 1888. This period of photographic portraiture corresponded to the large waves of settlement of New Zealand in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In using this format to paint portraits of birds, a colonial style was evoked. Traditionally, western portrait painting was a distinguished and culturally important

Fig. 4.0.4  
Victorian Bubble Glass  
Photo. Dimensions  
unknown.

expression of self worth for the wealthy. Shearer West explains this in her book *Portraiture* (2004).

When the French Royal Academy codified a hierarchy of artistic genres in the seventeenth century, portraiture was placed second after history painting. The idea here was that portraits should represent only the most important people and/or those who had distinguished themselves by virtue or heroism, so portraiture was considered to be an alternative to history painting in providing models of emulation for the spectator. (West, 2004, p. 12)

After the invention of the photo by Louis Daguerre in 1838, affordable portraiture became possible for the growing middle classes. Influenced by the perceived value of the painted portrait, the photographic portrait continued to be used as an expression of the worth of an individual's endeavour in the colonies.

And this was the age of individualism. The fixed order of the feudal past was gone and a dynamic middle class now stared at the camera, and the world, with growing self-confidence. The new lords of humankind, defiant and unsmiling, display through the skill of the gifted photograph that strength of character which was soon to remake much of the world in their image. (MacDonald, 1979, p. 22)

Gus MacDonald, author of *Camera. Victorian eyewitness* was writing specifically about America during the 1840s, but the context of the discussion was regarding photography in all parts of the world. What this implied for colonialism was more than just the expression of personal status for the dominant settlers. Photography could also be used to continue the colonial system.

As a tool for literalizing stereotypes and for exercising symbolic control over the bodies of others in the form of their photographic surrogates, photography played a central role in the formation of colonialism....But unlike such obviously handcrafted

images as paintings and prints, photographs belied their status as statements about the world, and seemed instead to be truthful, uninflected restatements of that world. The fact that the power of photographs to control and stereotype was invisible made them especially insidious tools in the establishment and maintenance of colonialism. (Pultz, 1995, p.21)



Fig 4.0.5  
K. Wilkin-Slaney,  
*The Marvellous Machine*  
(detail), oil on muslin,  
100mm x 100mm, 2008.

To choose to paint sparrow portraits in a Victorian photographic format investigated the implication of truthful representation outlined by Pultz, while allowing for a question to be asked about the validity of the image.

In painting the sparrow portraits directly from photographic images, the image was removed from the immediacy of photography, allowing the temporal nature of the act of painting to associate the image with the past and present in a fluid manner. The works referred to and questioned both history and the present, while acknowledging the entanglement of both, remembering that they are many parts of one work including the large work.

The act of painting the photograph removed from the image what Barthes described as the certainty of *what has been*.

The photograph does not necessarily say *what is no longer*, but only and for certain *what has been*. This distinction is decisive. In front of a photograph, our consciousness does not necessarily take the nostalgic path of memory (how many photographs are outside of individual time), but for every photograph existing in the world, the path of certainty: the Photograph's essence is to ratify what it represents. (Barthes, 1980, p. 85)

The painted photograph is an uncertain description of the past. In the final selection of work for *The Marvellous Machine*, the small sparrow portraits were presented in a manner that connotes to museum display, with protruding box-like mounts and black-and-white circular formats alluding to old time photos. This connected to a consideration of the judgements of Museology.

In the presentation of material, museums must consider an enormous array of questions regarding the meaning created by the presentation of a particular object to its audience.

One of the foremost insistent problems that museums face is precisely the idea that artefacts can be, and should be, divorced from their original context of ownership and use, redisplayed in a different context of meaning, which is regarded as having a superior authority.” (Saumarez Smith, 1989, p.9)

In creating a row of sparrow portraits much like a boardroom wall to accompany the large work, the portrait images invited a different context of meaning as outlined by Saumarez Smith. The sense of a superior authority in the painted-photo portraits opened up the question of this ‘truth’ further than the large work on its own could have.

## **5.0 CONCLUSION**

This project investigated the use of native birds in representation as a means of exploring New Zealand post-settler identity in visual art. The project did not find it possible to single out this mode of expression as being a decidedly detrimental form of appropriation of Maori authenticity. Rather it was revealed to be an expression of the extraordinarily complex relationship between the two cultures. The past happened and cannot be reversed or undone. The involvements and relationships of peoples should not be erased or separated.

The concluding body of work sought to express post-settler identity through the use of an introduced bird, not as a means of deliberately separating a settler image from native to express the two cultures as something separate, but rather to speak of the post-settler experience in a manner which acknowledges the past, addressing a post-settler unease in examining their/our entangled histories. By encouraging a more open self-appraisal, it is hoped that the project can contribute to Pakeha coming to terms with the past, acknowledging the bad as well as the good and accepting the entanglements of Maori and Pakeha in both past and present. Becoming-Pakeha.

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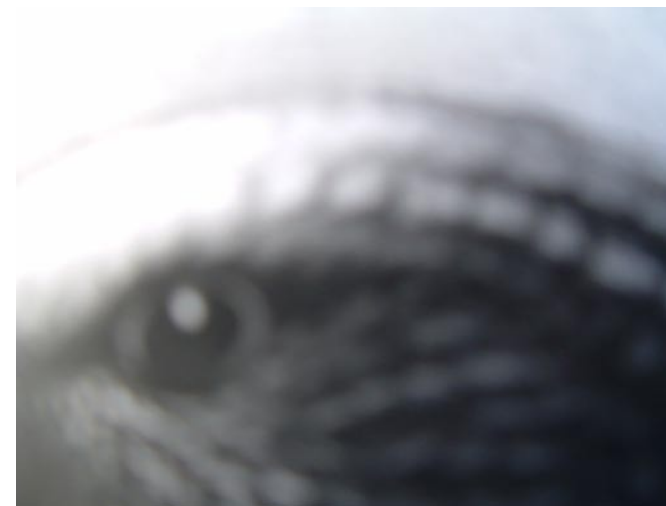
## 7.0 Appendix A

PROGRESSIVE IMAGES OF WORK

Katherine Wilkin-Slaney, 2007 – 2008.



A (i).. *Untitled*, digital photograph, 2007.



A (ii). *Untitled*, digital photograph, 2007.



A (iii). *Untitled*, digital photograph, 2007.



A (iv). *Untitled*, digital photograph, 2007.



A (v). *Huia/Sparrow Diptych*, mixed media on canvas,  
500mm x 730mm, 2007.

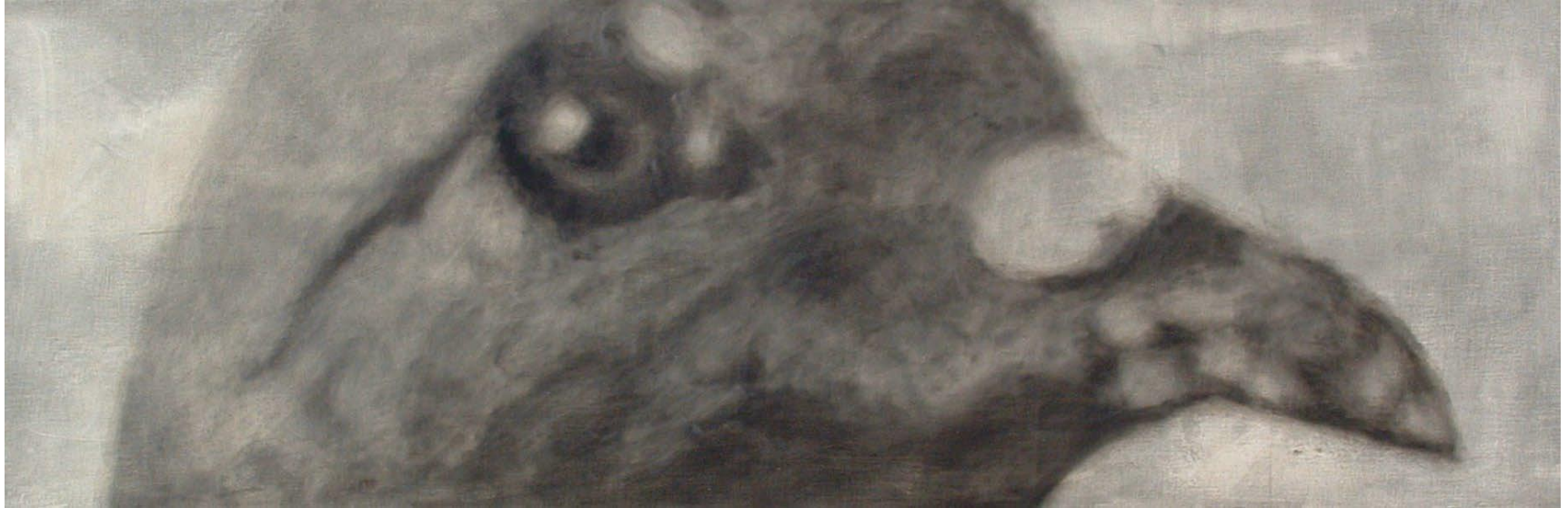


A (vi). *Kaka Eye*, oil on muslin on board, 850mm x 1220mm, 2007.





A (vii). *Large Sparrow*, oil on muslin on board, 850mm x 1220mm, 2007.



A (viii). *Rock Pigeon*, oil on muslin, 400mm x 1200mm, 2007.



A (ix). *String of Birds*, digital photographs, 2007.





A (x). *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 300mm x 1300mm, 2007.



A (xi). *Untitled group of 5*, oil on muslin on board, each 210mm x 290mm, 2007.



A (xii). *Deck the Kawakawa*, oil on muslin on board, 400mm x 1200mm, 2007.

A (xiii). *King of the Kawakawa*, oil on muslin on board,  
1200mm x 400mm, 2007.





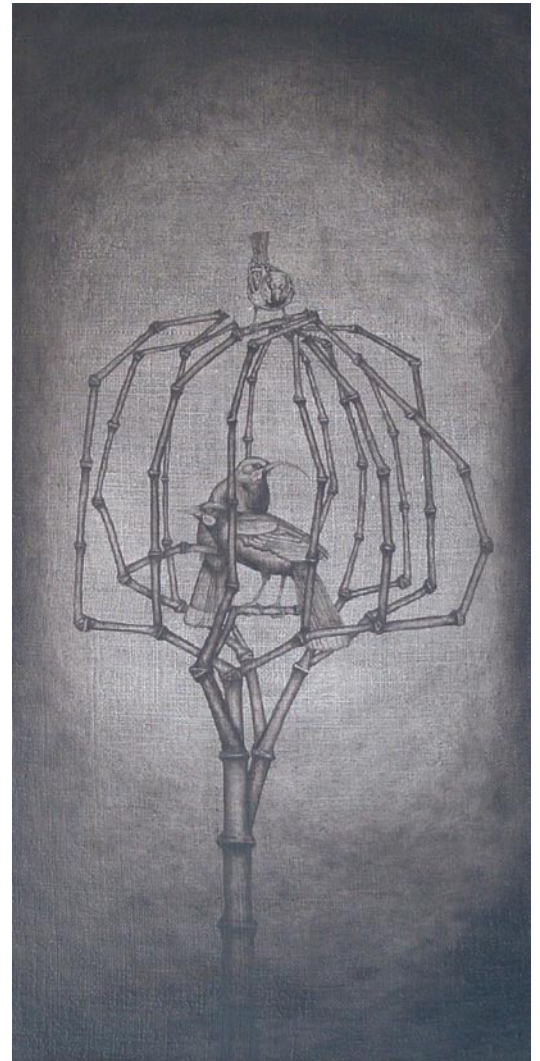


A (xiv). *Untitled group of 3*, oil on muslin on board,  
each 210mm x 290mm, 2008.



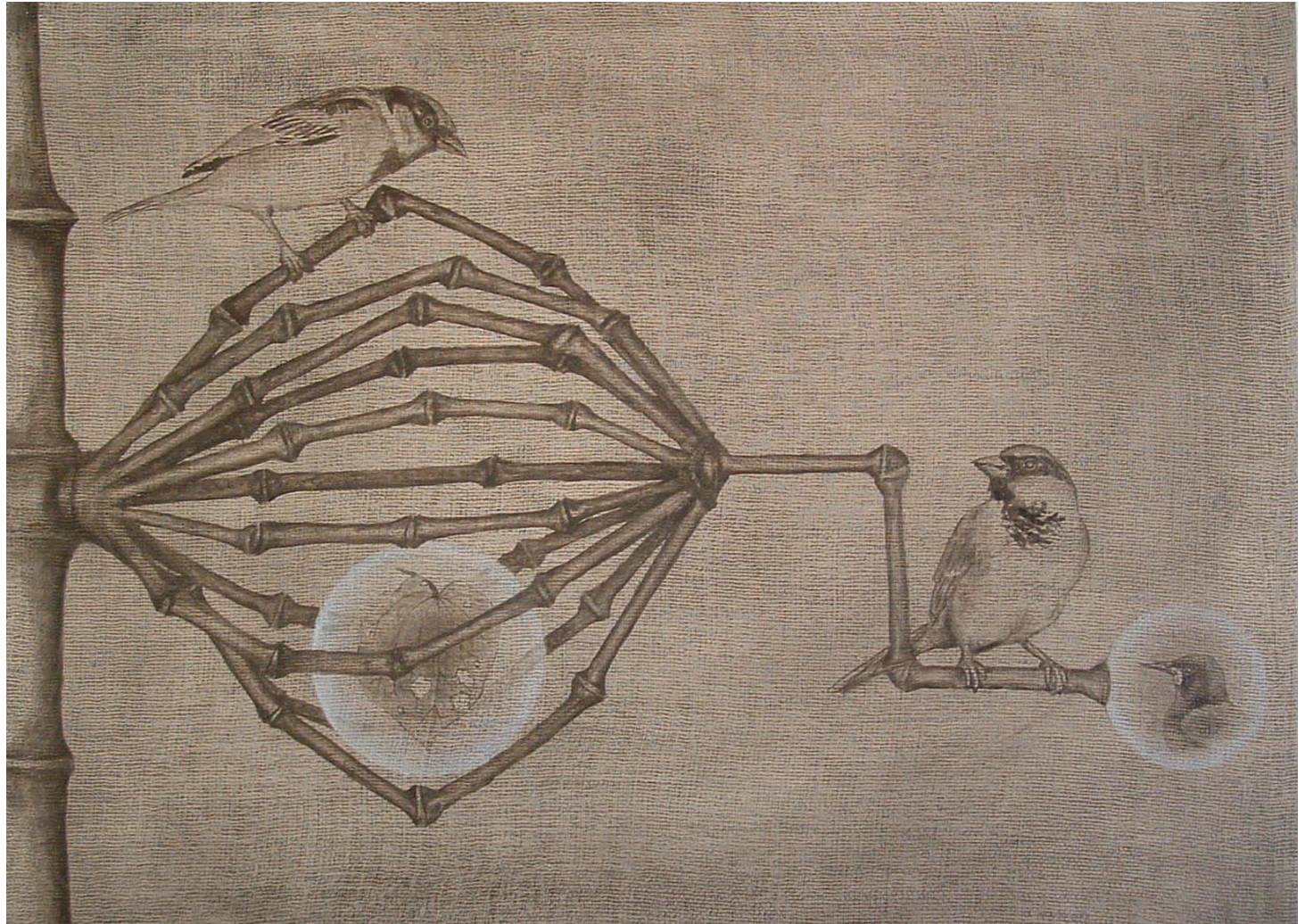


A (xv). *Watching/Waiting*, oil on canvas, 1000mm x 750mm, 2008.



A (xvi). *Birdcage*, oil on hessian, 910mm x 450mm, 2008.





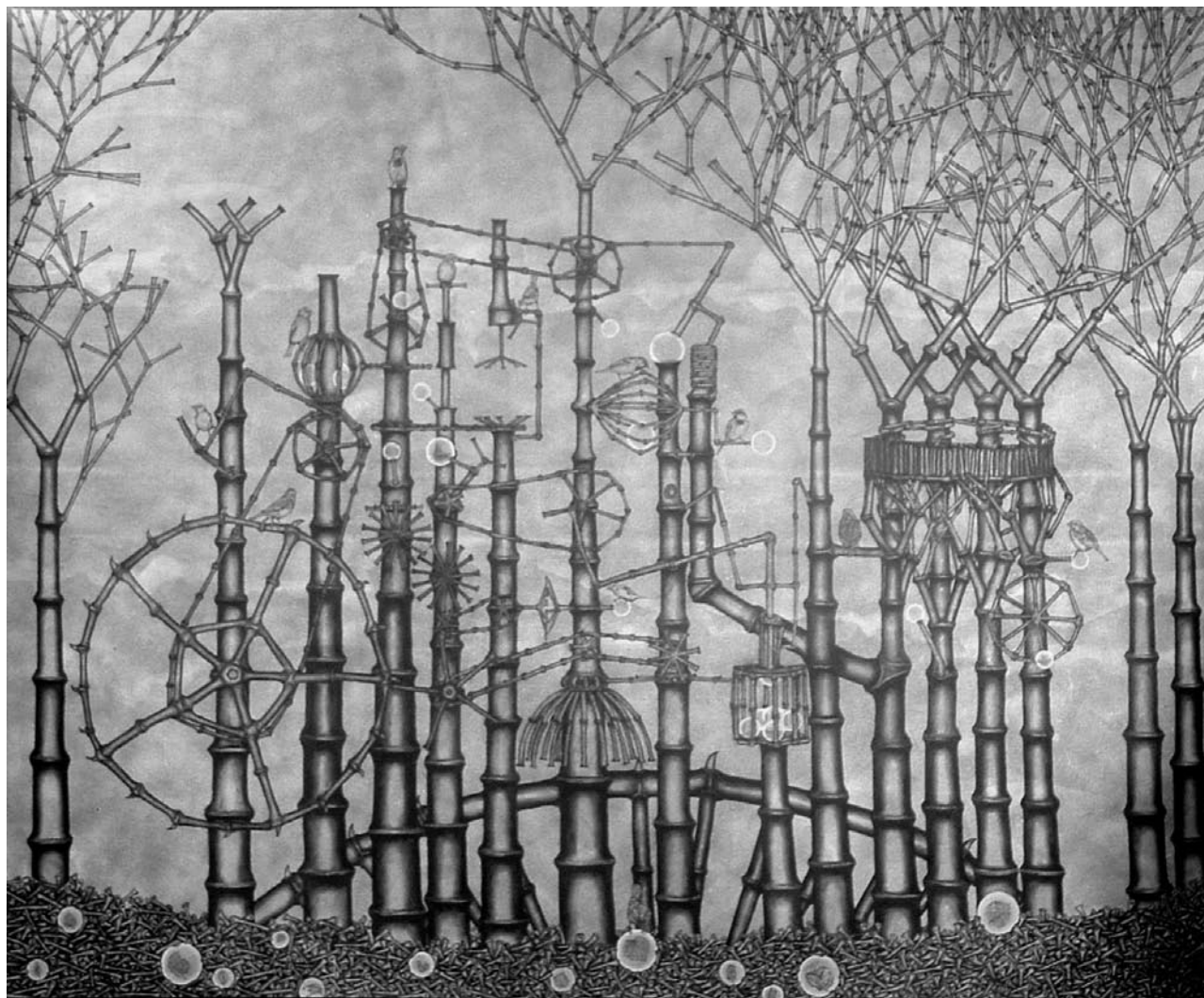
A (xvii). *Winding Mechanism*, oil on muslin on board, 210mm x 290mm, 2008.

## 8.0 Appendix B

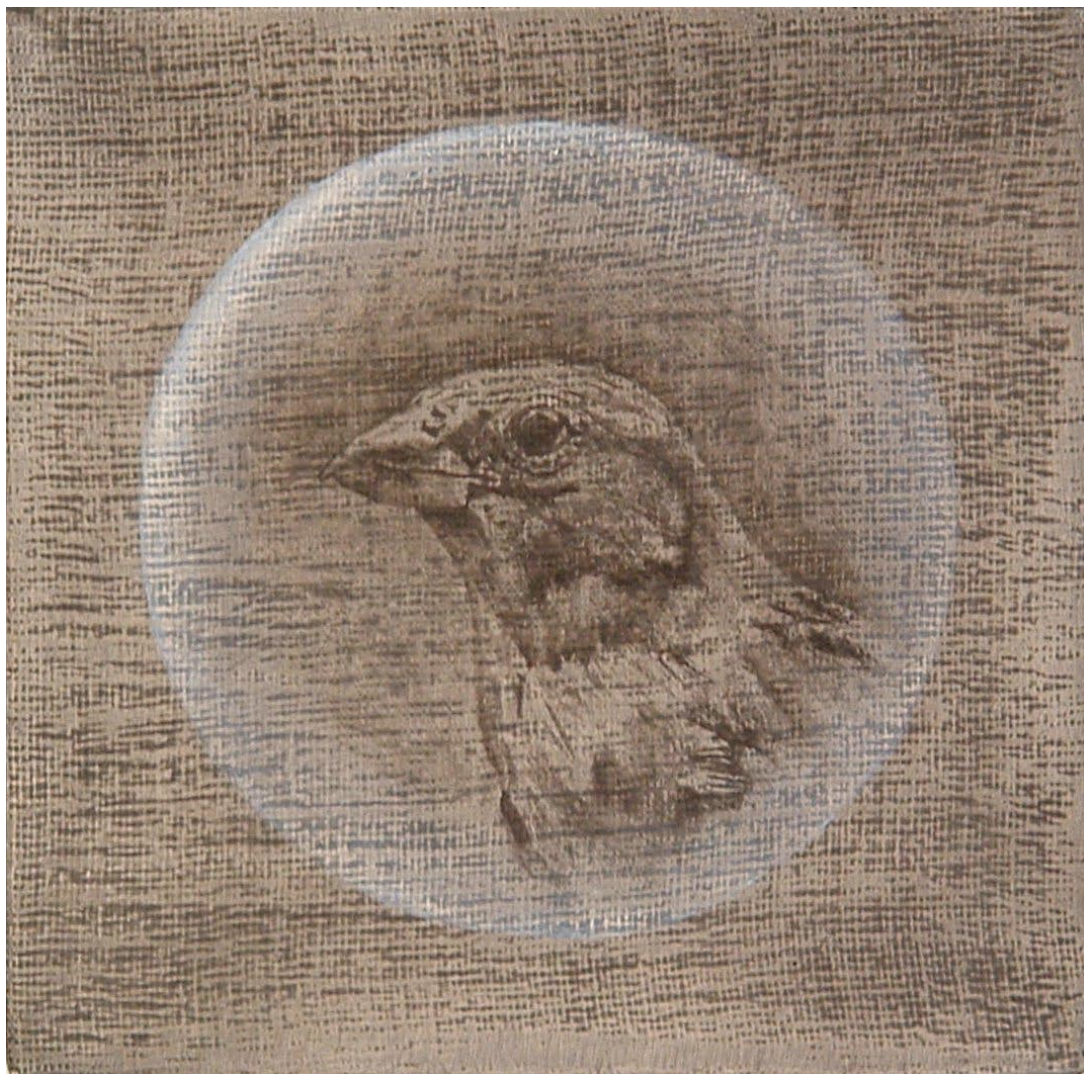
### **THE MARVELLOUS MACHINE**

Selected images and exhibition stills. November 2008.

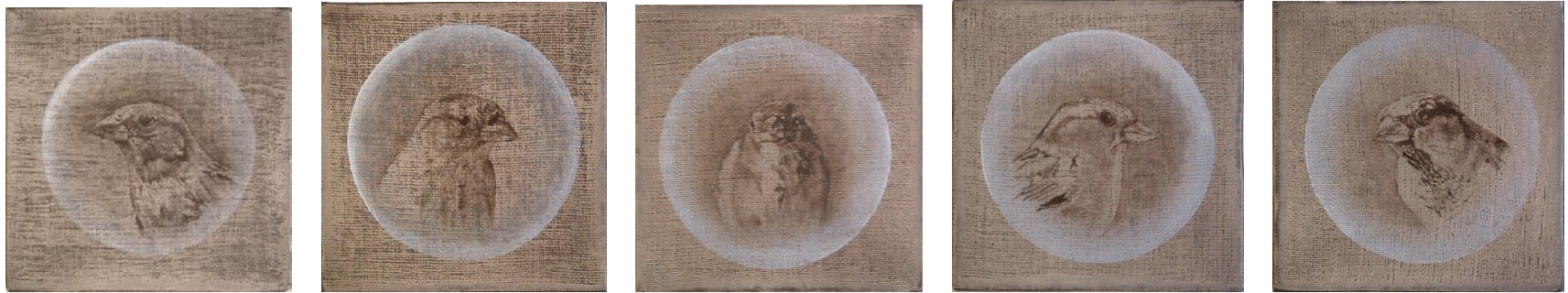




*The Marvellous Machine (detail)*, oil on canvas, 1800mm x 2100mm, 2008.



*The Marvellous Machine (detail)*, oil on muslin, 100mm x 100mm, 2008.



*The Marvellous Machine (detail)*, oil on muslin, 100mm x 100mm each, 2008.





*The Marvellous Machine*, oil on canvas and muslin, dimensions variable, 2008.



