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Pocket Guide to New Zealand Jewelry
June 12 – October 23, 2011

You're going to like New Zealand and its people. American troops that have preceded you have made plenty of firm friends and thereby paved the way for you. You'll soon feel at home, particularly if you remember from the beginning that you have plenty to learn, especially from New Zealanders themselves. No warnings are needed by any man of common sense and good will.

–Pocket Guide to New Zealand

Pocket Guide to New Zealand Jewelry is an engaging survey of contemporary jewelry made by artists intimately connected to a country that is both socially and culturally similar to and different from the United States. Organized by Velvet da Vinci Gallery and curated by New Zealand art historian, Damian Skinner, ***Pocket Guide*** underscores the aesthetic, material and theoretical elements that give New Zealand jewelry its distinctive flavor.

During the Second World War, American troops in New Zealand were issued a concise guide to familiarize themselves with the country in which they were stationed. Published by the War and Navy Departments in 1943, *Pocket Guide to New Zealand* was a descriptive guide to the history, culture, peoples and language of New Zealand.

Reassuring readers that New Zealanders were a pioneering society who had been "seeing our movies, listening to our radio, and reading our magazines", the *Pocket Guide to New Zealand* concluded that its readers would meet "a people with some of the British reserve, with many British methods and institutions, but with American outspokenness and directness – plus a working knowledge of American slang."

Five decades later, the ***Pocket Guide to New Zealand Jewelry*** continues this tradition of cultural exchange, introducing a new generation of Americans to contemporary jewelry made, as the original guide put it, "deep in the heart of the south seas." The ***Pocket Guide to New Zealand Jewelry*** is an indispensable introduction to a country that continues to transform cultural influences from England, Europe and America into jewelry that American audiences will find both familiar and strange.

The seventeen jewelers whose works are included in this exhibition play with a wide range of media and varied subject matter. For example, Jane Dodd presents a map that is convertible—assembled in its box, it appears to be an assortment of tiles imprinted with New Zealand topography, but when unfolded the tiles serve as pendants for a neckpiece. Jason Hall's *Faceted Diamond* is sculpted out of **greenstone**, an indigenous type of jade favored as a material for jewelry before the arrival of Europeans in New Zealand.

Other artists represented are: **Fran Allison, Pauline Bern, Renee Bevan, Kobi Bosshard, Octavia Cook, Andrea Daly, Peter Deckers, Warwick Freeman, Niki Hastings-McFall, Lynn Kelly, Peter McKay, Alan Preston, Lisa Walker, Anna Wallis** and **Areta Wilkinson**.

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Aotearoa

"Aotea-roa". That is the Maori name for New Zealand. It means "Long White Cloud" – so-called from the snow-capped mountains first seen from the sea.

–Pocket Guide to New Zealand

New Zealanders spend a lot of time thinking about who they are. The silhouette of New Zealand, the country's shape on the map, is used in all kinds of art and popular culture. New Zealanders regularly trace the shape of their country, as if warding off the fear that they might become invisible. (A fear that is confirmed by the frequently encountered maps of the world in which New Zealand is simply missing.) American self-identity is hardly ever challenged because the nation is powerful. By contrast, New Zealanders have to construct a relatively fragile self-identity in the face of the daily barrage of media, popular culture and politics that flows in from the rest of the world.

Native flora and fauna have huge symbolic value in New Zealand. So many of the symbols or emblems used to represent New Zealand globally are drawn from nature. Two prominent examples are the **kiwi**, a small flightless bird, and the **silver fern**, both emblems that turn up in popular culture as well as contemporary jewelry. What is unique is the way these emblems define New Zealanders overseas. Americans are not called Bald Eagles, but New Zealanders are known as Kiwis.

Native flora has often been used by New Zealanders, particularly those who are not **Maori** (the indigenous people), to make a claim about where they live, and what makes them special. As a result, this subject is ripe for reinterpretation, a group of emblems that are an interesting mix of cliché and deeply felt symbol of who New Zealanders believe themselves to be.

One symbol which doesn't elicit a lot of feeling in the United States is the rose, which became America's national flower when President Ronald Reagan issued Proclamation 5574 in 1986. In New Zealand contemporary jewelry, the **rose** is an ambivalent emblem of New Zealand identity, precisely because it is an introduced species. Brought to New Zealand by British settlers, the rose wages a war of affection with native plants in public and private gardens all around the country. Ultimately it is a statement that European New Zealanders, however much they might wish otherwise, originate from somewhere else. The rose is an interloper in the South Pacific, a "beautiful emblem of the intruders who have stayed."

Way Back When

The story of New Zealand contemporary jewelry is, like the settlement of New Zealand itself, a tale of successive waves of peoples and cultures washing onto the shores of this far flung group of islands. The resources on which New Zealand contemporary jewelry draws include Pacific and Maori adornment, and European modernism. It is a rich and somewhat odd brew.

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Maori are a Pacific people who settled in New Zealand around AD 1200. There are many similarities between Maori and other Pacific cultures, in language, social structures and religion. It is also important to remember that New Zealand was a colonial power in the region, administering a number of Pacific territories in a smaller, local version of England. New Zealand gave up its imperial duties in the 1960s, and the country's Pacific neighbors became important when Britain decided to join the European Economic Community (later European Union) in 1973, leaving New Zealand without its major trading and cultural partner. By then, large numbers of Pacific peoples were living in New Zealand, and Auckland had the largest Pacific population of any city in the world.

Pacific adornment became part of the resources that New Zealand jewelers could draw on in their work. It not only offered powerful ways to think about identity, but it was a source of objects with distinctive philosophies about jewelry's purpose. Pacific adornment is directly and boldly concerned with the body, as well as other meanings that jewelry carries, such as status and identity. New Zealand jewelers made the most of this.

It was the arrival of a group of European-born and trained jewelers in the 1960s that began another important strand in the development of the art in New Zealand. Coming from Switzerland, Germany, Denmark and England, these gold- and silversmiths passed on their skills to the next generation. They helped to create and sustain a market and audience for contemporary jewelry by getting people used to wearing jewelry that was conceptual, about more than traditional designs and precious materials.

While this generation of European jewelers worked in silver, and sometimes gold, they used semi-precious stones and shied away from making work that had anything to do with conventional jewelry's association with wealth and status. The effect on the next generation was significant. New Zealand jewelers began to see "New Zealand jewelry as moving away from being stereotyped status symbols and becoming more individual, exciting and human."

Meet the People

The New Zealand natives are called the Maoris, pronounced "mow" to rhyme with "cow" and "rie". The correct plural is Maori but you will find most people putting an S on the end. These New Zealand natives are first cousins of the Hawaiians and are a proud, tough, fighting race who have won a status of complete equality with the white people in New Zealand, so never think of them or refer to them as natives or regard them as having any inferior status. . . . The present Maoris go to schools and universities, have a Cabinet Minister of their own race, and four Maori members in the House of Representatives. Their Maori Batallion [sic] has been the most famous unit of all the New Zealand troops in the present war. You will find that there is no color bar and that Maoris eat in the same restaurants, travel in the same trains.

–Pocket Guide to New Zealand

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The idea of the New Zealander has undergone significant change since the *Pocket Guide to New Zealand* happily applied the term to a white male in 1943. Apart from including women, it is necessary to introduce another term, **'Pakeha'**, a Maori word that means New Zealanders of European descent, whose values and behavior have been changed by living in New Zealand.

New Zealand contemporary jewelry has a very interesting story to tell about **Pakeha**, and their emblems of identity. In the 1980s a number of jewelers started to work with natural materials and in ways that drew on Pacific and Maori adornment. This jewelry was exhibited internationally in a show called *Bone Stone Shell: New Jewellery New Zealand* (1988) which was a celebration of New Zealand and of what was distinctive about living on an island at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean.

The origin of this jewelry was in part about rescuing natural materials like **paua shell** from its bad treatment in tourist souvenirs. Jewelers of the time looked for other ways to treat natural materials, favoring the existing structures such as the rim of the shell. Pacific adornment design traditions provided source material – jewelry in natural materials such as shell has been made for thousands of years. These natural materials were part of New Zealanders' everyday lives – found on the beach, for example, collected, and taken home.

This jewelry addressed the needs of local audiences, who were keen to buy and wear objects that were effectively a kind of tribal adornment for urban New Zealanders. Pakeha were a settler culture that had grown native and become a new society of Pacific Islanders in touch with Maori, the indigenous people, and the island environment in which they lived.

Of course, what **Pakeha** jewelry looks like now is quite different. From the late 1980s there was a shift brought about by the graduates of the craft courses which were established in polytechnics in the 1980s. These new jewelers were in stark contrast to the proudly self-taught generation who led the way in the use of natural materials. In broad terms, New Zealand contemporary jewelry gave up trying to create powerful statements of identity, and began to think about other issues as well.
Nowadays New Zealand jewelers don't always have to wear their love of home on their sleeves, or chests, and it is possible to make work that tackles the wider context and meanings of contemporary jewelry. If it addresses such issues at all, a lot of Pakeha jewelry would now tend to be about the process of creating national identity, rather than an example of it.

Maori jewelry has continued to exist and develop at the same time as Pakeha jewelry. Production of customary or traditional forms – such as the ***hei tiki***, a stylized human figure worn around the neck – has continued in the present, sometimes embracing new modern materials such as plastic, but also using materials such as greenstone or bone which were favored before the arrival of Europeans in New Zealand.

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But perhaps the most important story is the emergence of Maori and Pacific Islander jewelers who also attended the craft courses established in the 1980s. Working with the techniques and materials of contemporary jewelry (the full palette of options, including European materials and New Zealand materials), these jewelers often work in ways that speak both to ideas of contemporary jewelry and to Maori and Pacific art. Their jewelry also asks important questions about what Maori and Pacific art and identity might be in the present, and how these cultures will continue to grow and change.

Send Your Girl a Tiki

The ***hei tiki*** is the most precious of all Maori (the indigenous people) personal adornments. They are female, or possibly sexless, figures with their heads titled to one side, and hands often placed on the hips. *Hei tiki* were worn by men and women, and they were highly prized, treated like heirlooms and passed down through generations.

The ***hei tiki*** demonstrates the importance of ***pounamu*** or **greenstone** within Maori culture. Greenstone, a type of jade, is associated with the mythological homeland of Hawaiki. This sacredness has affected the use of greenstone in contemporary jewelry. It ensures that greenstone is extremely meaningful, a powerful emblem or symbol in itself that carries with it a range of values, such as preciousness and spirituality. **Pakeha** (New Zealanders of European descent) have developed the meanings of greenstone in new and interesting ways, but this act of transformation is always related to the meaning that the material has within Maori culture. Greenstone, then, is precious to both Maori and Pakeha, and more than any other material is able to suggest strong feelings of pride and belonging to New Zealand. It is quite common to find New Zealanders of different ethnicities wearing a greenstone pendant (although not usually a *hei tiki*) to express exactly these feelings.

To show their sense of belonging to a new land, Pakeha have adopted elements of Maori culture. The hei tiki (and more generally greenstone) is an emblem of belonging to a new land, and it represents a special connection to Maori. The problem is that this emblem, with all its symbolic claims, is worn by the same group who have taken control of Maori land and culture, and whose political and cultural domination is a direct result of colonization. Not surprisingly, Maori take exception to Pakeha showing how much they are at home in New Zealand by wearing the signs of the culture they have pushed aside and oppressed. When Maori begin to claim their culture, and assert their special rights to it, this undermines Pakeha use of emblems like the *hei tiki*. What at first appears to be a special mark of Pakeha identity and sense of belonging can actually turn out to be a powerful emblem of the illegitimacy of their connection to New Zealand.

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New Zealand and the World

On most maps, New Zealand is shown down in the left-hand corner, a fact that makes Americans think it's a long way from nowhere. This map gives a truer picture of New Zealand in relation to the rest of the world and clearly indicates its strategic importance. You will notice that it lies below the Equator, whereas the United States lies above it. As a result, the seasons are reversed. When it is winter in the United States, it is summer in New Zealand and vice versa.

–Pocket Guide to New Zealand

It could be argued that New Zealand's only major contribution on the world stage has been its anti-nuclear stance in the 1980s. Because American (and British) warships visiting New Zealand refused to confirm or deny if they were nuclear armed or powered, the anti-nuclear ban meant breaking alliances with traditional military allies. When anti-nuclear legislation was passed by the New Zealand government in 1987, the ANZUS treaty came to an end.

The New Zealand jewelry equivalent to the anti-nuclear stance is the 1980s jewelry using natural materials and references to **Maori** (the indigenous people) and Pacific adornment. As John Edgar wrote in the catalogue for the 1988 exhibition *Bone Stone Shell: New Jewellery New Zealand*, bone, stone and shell "are not used in the European tradition as additive elements and decorative appendages on a framework of metal. Here they are the structure, and their natural forms are a strong imperative in this jewellery." This jewelry wasn't a copy of what was going on internationally; it was an attempt to do something else entirely, to forge a unique path.

On the whole, following the lead of New Zealand art generally, New Zealand contemporary jewelry has a history of keeping to itself. Exchanges with other countries were, in the early years, few and far between. The four pioneering European jewelers in New Zealand – Günther Taemmler, Kobi Bosshard, Jens Hansen and Tanya Ashken – brought with them skills, attitudes and aesthetics that would have a decisive impact on New Zealand contemporary jewelry. But they were not portals between New Zealand and Europe.

In the 1980s New Zealand jewelers began to have significant contact with Australian contemporary jewelry, traveling to the Jewelers and Metalsmiths Group of Australia conferences held every two years, exhibiting in Australian galleries and meeting their Australian peers. And in the 1980s a range of international jewelers began to travel to New Zealand, giving workshops and establishing the networks that would lead to later forays of New Zealand jewelry into Europe. The most notable are Hermann Jünger's workshop in 1982, and Otto Künzli's workshop in 1990. In 1985 American jeweler and Fulbright scholar David La Plantz gave a series of workshops around New Zealand. American jeweler Mary Lee Hu visited in 1986 and gave an impromptu slide talk in Auckland after making contact with members of the Fingers jewellery co-operative and gallery. These appear to be the few moments of direct contact between New Zealand and American contemporary jewelry.

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New Zealand contemporary jewelry is belatedly following the lead of New Zealand contemporary art, which has rethought the model of the New Zealand artist in the world at large. It used to be that New Zealand artists became established in New Zealand first, and then took their practice overseas. Critical respect in New Zealand was necessary; first conquer the local scene, and then turn your attention to the rest of the world. Now, artists can do both at once, or simply locate themselves offshore and be an international artist without tackling the local market first. It used to be that every time a New Zealand artist went overseas they had to represent the national brand, NZ Inc. This is not true any longer. The freedom to engage with the world is unparalleled. It would be inaccurate to say that New Zealand contemporary jewelers have achieved the same freedom from the gravity pull of New Zealand as a geographical and conceptual location, but things are definitely changing.

How They Talk

New Zealanders speak English with an accent all their own. It is apt to sound a bit like English Cockney to American ears, although it really isn't. Such words as "now" are given a rather nasal pronunciation like "neow". Words like "day" sometimes sound a little like "die". There is a story, probably untrue, of a child who was asked to describe a bison. He said, "A bison is what you wash your hands and fice in!"

–Pocket Guide to New Zealand

New Zealand jewelry has been described as having "a heightened sensitivity to (quasi-linguistic) codes" and a "prevalence of a multitude of icons and signs, consciously engaged." This helps explain the common use of the emblem in New Zealand contemporary jewelry, and an interest in its close cousin the badge. Of course, New Zealand isn't alone in this interest. Much contemporary jewelry in America is also concerned with highly elaborate visual codes, both those relating to jewelry's own history (badges, insignia, emblems, signet rings) and to the wider signs and icons that circulate in society. Jewelers such as Richard Mawdsley, Bruce Metcalf, Betsy King and Donald Paul Tompkins all engage with quasi-linguistic codes. They explore the potential of icons and signs, and the relationship between the object and the body.

Unlike American jewelry, which tends to a kind of figurative narrative symbolism, New Zealand jewelry's interest in the emblem tends towards the abstract, with little interest in the possibilities of narrative jewelry. Key aspects of the performance of the emblem in New Zealand jewelry are the material used to make the object, a heightened sensitivity to the meanings that different materials can have, and how such materials – shell, or greenstone, or silver – map onto a larger context of social relations, cultural and personal identities. This is also to do with the particular value that natural materials hold for New Zealanders as a useful symbol of where we come from, and who we are.

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New Zealand jewelry seems to find meaning in a language that seems personal and idiosyncratic – in which a simple spiral can be the most contested sign within the culture, where the use of greenstone, or shell, can read like a claim to cultural status and a proposal about identity. What is particularly distinctive about New Zealand jewelry is not so much its belief in the power and importance of emblems and symbols, but its particular language. Meaning can be generated from unexpected—and, from the perspective of American jewelry, unshared—places.

Glossary

Pakeha—a Maori word that means New Zealanders of European descent, whose values and behavior have been changed by living in New Zealand.

Maori—indigenous peoples of New Zealand

Greenstone (or ***pounamu***)—a type of jade that is associated with the mythological homeland of *Hawaiki*.

Hei tiki—a stylized human figure worn around the neck. They are female, or possibly sexless, figures with their heads titled to one side, and hands often placed on the hips. *Hei tiki* were worn by men and women, and they were highly prized, treated like heirlooms and passed down through generations.