

Dispelling the Myth

a look at changing attitudes towards death

'Death must simply become the discreet but dignified exit of a peaceful person from a helpful society. A death without pain or suffering, and ultimately, without fear.' Philippe Aries¹

Mortality is a recurring theme in art history and these responses to death in art reflect various ways of thinking about dying and living with the death of a loved one. Late last year Te Manawa was approached by Hospice New Zealand to create an exhibition contemplating some of these responses, which have evolved as society has, and so *Dispelling the myth* began.

While death is an inevitable and common experience we all share, the ways various cultures, religions and individuals mourn and celebrate life in its passing are too vast for us to explore in any one exhibition. However in approaching such a task, we can look at some of the art works and objects in Te Manawa store rooms, combined with the work of contemporary artists around the country to consider some of the thinking around death in New Zealand.

¹ Aries, Philippe 'The hour of our death', Pub, 1981 by Oxford University Press New York

One of the most commonly held myths about death in Western society is the fear of it as an unknown. What happens to us when we're gone? How do we cope with death's arrival and with our own grief after a death has taken place? How do people say goodbye in a way which will honour the deceased and ensure a part of them remains with us forever? This exhibition takes a journey through a selection of viewpoints on death and grief, culminating in the story of Hospice New Zealand, which supports people who are living close to death by helping them to make the most of life.

From a historical perspective Rembrandt van Rijn's *Death of the Virgin*, created in the 17th century, depicts a concept which was widely accepted across Europe by the time of the Victorian era in the mid 19th century. Here we see many people tentatively caring for a central figure that is literally waiting to be taken away. This scene represents the concept of 'the good death', where impending death was accepted and prepared for. People said goodbye to friends and family, tied together loose business, personal and spiritual matters. They had their last moments on earth in their own bed, surrounded by their family and their priest who would send them off in the belief that death was the divine will of God.

Christianity has since spread and diversified and now encompasses about a third of the world's belief system. Broadly speaking, Christianity's view of mortality embraces the conviction that everyone can share in Christ's sacrifice of himself for their sins, and so have eternal life. There is a strong belief in a good ending, that despite any harm or grief



Death of the Virgin
Rembrandt van Rijn (b.1606, d.1669) 1659

experienced by people on earth we will eventually arrive in a safe place, healed and close to those we love. The influence of such concepts can be seen in New Zealand in the latter half of the 20th century. Art works by various artists in the collection at Te Manawa reflect these concepts by the use of stories and iconography taken from Christianity. Examples include works by Pat Hanly and Philip Clairmont who have appropriated the angel and the cross to illustrate their own personal viewpoints on mortality. From early in his career, Colin McCahon began to make works relating to his Catholic upbringing and his ensuing spiritual explorations... His painting, *There is only one direction (Mary and Jesus)*, could be read as

Christ's mother contemplating her young son's fate; or as an observation that despite our many varied belief systems, we will all inescapably face death.

While art works such as this question faith, our confidence in a good ending is also influenced by a general trend away from the belief in 'the good death'. There are many factors behind this, one of which is the unequivocal impact of war. People realised that even though soldiers went into battle to fight for what they believed was right and true, many of them died lonely and senseless deaths. They left our world far away from their families without any kind of

spiritual send off, and often with little opportunity for their loved ones to gain the closure of mourning. Several of the works in this exhibition, such as Jeffery Harris's *It takes time*, make social comments about the effects war has had on our view of life and death. This painting is almost overwhelming with its struggling soldiers and bloody landscape. It reminisces on newspaper clippings Harris used to collect which comment poignantly on the Vietnam War. This painting suggests that not only the physical but also the emotional angst resulting from loss take time to heal.

The funeral has long been an extremely important part of dealing with death and grief, again with countless variations. Early Western tradition saw mourning drawn out, observing practices which were largely communal. Showing one's grief was publicly encouraged and those who had suffered a loss were helped by their community to be re-integrated into daily life. In contrast, by the mid 20th century rituals had changed immensely as physically dealing with death was handed over to a funeral director. David Lupton's image of *Beverly Carruthers, Funeral Director* shows the funeral director as a vital part of our community.

From a Māori perspective, concepts of tapu and noa have remained an important part of preparing a person's wairua (soul) to be safely separated from their body and join their tūpuna (ancestors). For somebody to be tapu is for them to be in a sacred state, where



It Takes Time
Jeffery Harris 1981



Beverly Carruthers, Funeral Director
David Lupton 1993

they become restricted and under *atua* (protection). Noa is when a person is free from this state, to be ordinary or unrestricted. When a person dies, they become tapu. The word for a Māori funeral, tangihanga comes partly from the term "to weep". A traditional tangi could once last weeks, with the whole whānau (family) of the deceased becoming tapu to help prepare the deceased for their journey. Many people from the departed's hapū (extended family/ sub tribe) and iwi (tribe) would come to pay their respects.

Lois White's *Māori Tangi* illustrates the expression of grief and mourning through wailing and weeping. Accompanying this would be Oriori (a lullaby or song relaying a person's tribal ancestry and history); Moteatea (lament, traditional chant) and karakia (prayer). Tapu

and noa are two age old concepts which will always remain the same, but in contemporary society the way a tangihanga is carried out has become varied and is viewed in many different ways by different people. There has been a substantial change in the length and attendance of tangi, which now last three or four days while usually only immediate family attend. Custom and cultural identity can become compromised as Western ways influence tradition.

Also important in Māori culture is the belief that your tūpuna are always with you, guiding you and protecting you and that their wairua can become embodied in whenua (land), in te reo (language) and in taonga (treasures). Ultimately death is a loss which leaves a trace of something very powerful behind, as the



Black and White T.V.
Reuben Paterson
Image reproduced courtesy of the artist 2005

presence of a deceased loved one will always be with you. This is expressed in the soundscape *Past Present and Future* by Tiki Taane which incorporates the song of his kuia (grandmother) Inuwai Taanetinorau. Similarly *Black and White T.V.*, the glitter dust screen print by Reuben Paterson, relates to his reconnection with parts of his whakapapa (genealogy) after his father's passing. Both artists use their contemporary practice as a medium to draw their audiences in. They subtly remind us that the people we love who are no longer physically here are always with us, guiding the things we do in life.

There are many more contemporary artists now addressing their own personal losses with their art practice, perhaps partly as a way of coming to terms with facing death. In the series *In my fathers garden*, Anne Noble quietly and thoughtfully pays tribute to her father and family by documenting the time in his home after his death, including his favourite place, the garden, as well

as the scattering of his ashes. On the other side of this, with delicate intuitive mark making Kristin Hollis intimately captured the last few years of her husband's life as he began to disappear into dementia.

While caring for the dying was once the responsibility of the family, a substantial change occurred between the 1930's and 1950's where the hospital became the destination when people could no longer



Pöhutukawa/Inside out - In My Father's Garden
Anne Noble
Image reproduced courtesy of the artist and McNamara Gallery, Wanganui 2007

can at times be rendered useless and inappropriate, like the human hair on this wheelchair. Who could be comforted and supported by something which very clearly belongs to someone else? When medical staff respect a person's spiritual or cultural beliefs and their personal needs, patients receive the care they require for personal well-being and to feel more prepared for what they have to face.

Today Hospice New Zealand works to bridge these kinds of gaps as a service which provides palliative care to those who have incurable conditions. Palliative means to "cloak" in Latin. Not only synonymous with the hospice, this kind of care also takes place in people's homes, hospitals and in aged care facilities. The Hospice aims to be a concept, a "philosophy of care" ², endeavouring to give patients a higher quality of life by helping them to take control and make the most of what they have. Hospice New Zealand looks at care in a holistic way: spiritually, physically and emotionally treating people as individuals with unique needs. A large part of this also includes working with patients' families in care and counselling so that no one needs to be alone in their experiences.

One of the services many hospices in New Zealand offer to

² Rankin, Janine. *Arohanui: Story of a hospice*. Palmerston North Arohanui Hospice p. 6

receive care elsewhere. Essentially if one's ailments could not be cured, the hospital was where you went at the end of your life.

Aimee Rose Stephenson's sculpture *Wheelchair* could be interpreted as a warning to healthcare professionals to heed cultural meaning and personal situations when treating patients. When taken out of context Western practices

Whether a person is directly or indirectly affected by an incurable condition or not, the message Hospice New Zealand sends out is a positive one we can all share in. The histories reflected in these art works and artefacts highlight a recurring theme. Keeping in mind the many views on death, our experience of it has, for various reasons, moved from a social to an isolated one, and in Western society this has contributed to a certain fear. Ironically it is the developments of our modern world and the professionalization of services surrounding death that have left many people without the necessary means to come to terms with it. We can see this in the responses of artists who question, celebrate and appropriate belief systems, as well as in the positive steps taken by those who have made work which deals with their own personal grief. The Hospice today seeks to share the burden and dispel these myths, in the hope that when we do face death we will have the support and necessary means to make the most of our experience.

patients is a range of art and craft activities. This is akin to the practise of art therapy which aims to encourage the expression of emotions through creativity and physically making things. Such a process helps people to come to terms with certain issues they face, thereby increasing their quality of life. Graham Hamlin, a current patient with the Arohanui Hospice in Palmerston North says *the staff have helped him to gain new energy and meet like-minded people as well as giving his wife a chance to live her own life. To him, Graham's print* symbolises "the joining of hands, in prayer and thanks to God for giving [him] the opportunity to live again keeping in mind [his] deep belief that we are born to die."³

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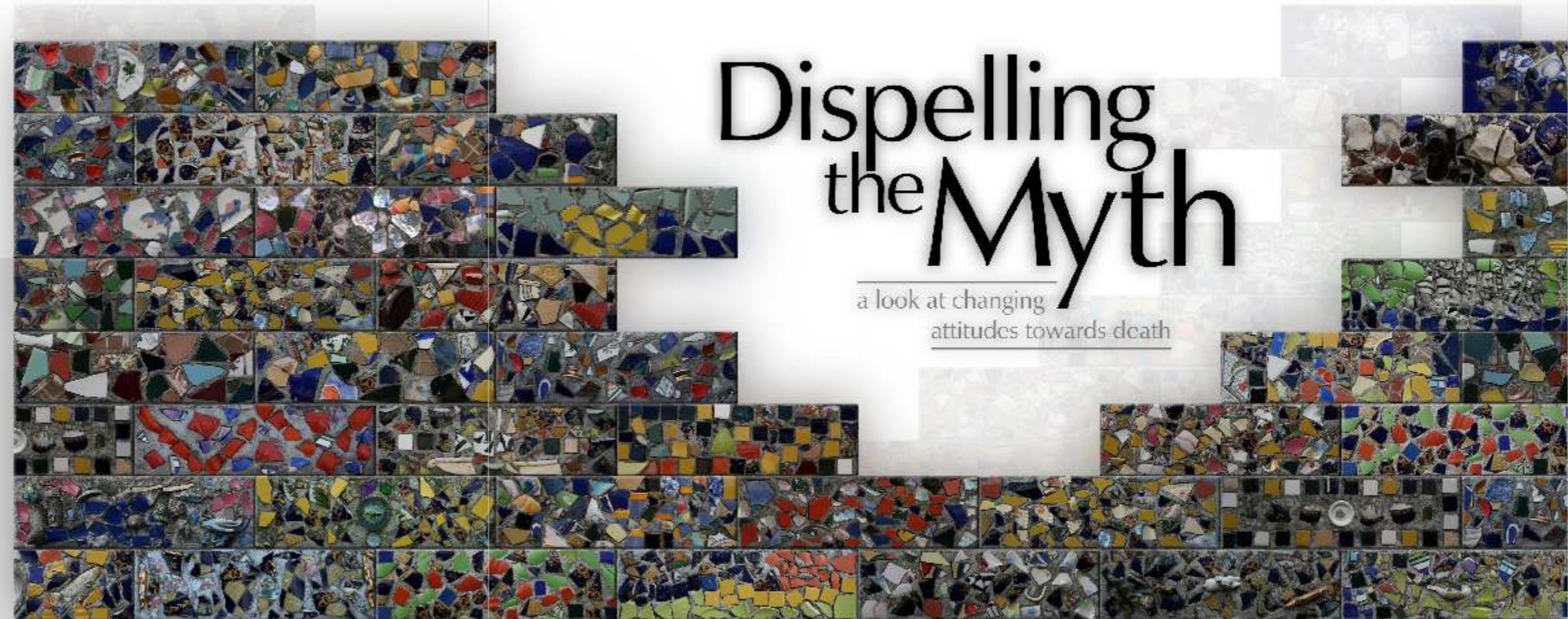
Mosaic frieze Arohanui Hospice patients and staff Reproduction of ceramic and cement frieze Collection of Arohanui Hospice <i>Images courtesy of Arohanui Hospice</i>	2003	Memorial Bunnythorpe, 1st October 1986 Laurence Aberhart Silver gelatine, gold and selenium toned photograph Collection of Te Manawa Museums Trust	1986	Pungarehu ki pungarehu (ashes to ashes) Julie Paama-Pengelley Mixed media on canvas Collection of Te Manawa University, Palmerston North	1999
Death of the Virgin Rembrandt van Rijn (b.1606, d.1669) Heliograph of an etching on paper Collection of Te Manawa Art Society Incorporated, gifted by Basil Honour	1659	It Takes Time Jeffrey Harris Oil on canvas Collection of Te Manawa Museums Trust	1981	Pōhutukawa/inside out - In My Father's Garden Anne Noble Inkjet print on archival paper Courtesy of the artist and McNamara Gallery, Wanganui	2007
There is Only One Direction (Mary and Jesus) Colin McCahon (b.1919, d.1987) Oil on board Private collection, Wellington	1952	Beverly Carruthers, Funeral Director David Lupton Black and white photograph Collection of Te Manawa Museums Trust, gifted by the artist	1993	CB/over the bar- In My Father's Garden Anne Noble Inkjet print on archival paper Courtesy of the artist and McNamara Gallery, Wanganui	2007
Black Crucifixion Philip Clairmont (b.1949, d.1984) Silkscreen print on paper Collection of Te Manawa Museums Trust	1981	Bereavement cards for Pearl Evans on her husband's death Collection of Te Manawa Museums Trust, gifted by Mrs. Pearl Evans	1932	Untitled [Charles Bruce Noble] In My Father's Garden Anne Noble Inkjet print on archival paper Courtesy of the artist and McNamara Gallery, Wanganui	2007
Angel and Dancer Pat Hanly (b.1932, d.2004) Crayon on paper Collection of the Hanly Family Trust	1959	Māori Tangi A. Lois White (b.1903, d.1984) Pencil on paper Collection of Te Manawa Art Society Incorporated	circa 1923-1978	Face 9 Kristin Hollis Charcoal on paper Collection of the artist	2003
Young Man, I say to you Arise Colin McCahon (b.1919, d.1987) Conte and wash on paper Collection of Te Manawa Art Society Incorporated	1969	Korowai Maker unknown Flax and feathers Collection of Mr Herbert A. Seifert	circa 1900-1909	Death and Love Jeffrey Harris Etching Collection of Te Manawa Art Society Incorporated, gifted by the artist	1977
War Victims A. Lois White (b.1903, d.1984) Watercolour on paper Collection of Te Manawa Art Society Incorporated	circa 1935	Past Present Future Lyrics written and performed by Inuwai Taanetiorau Keys, guitars, percussion and samples by Tiki Taane Porotiti by Ariane Craig Smith Time Machine by Andrew Penman Courtesy of Tikidub Productions www.tikidub.com	2007	Wheelchair Aimee Rose Stephenson Wheelchair, human hair Collection of the artist	2006
Acre of Wounds Ralph Hotere Screenprint and letterpress on paper Collection of Te Manawa Art Society Incorporated	1974	Past Present Future Album cover of Tiki Taane and Uekaha Taanetiorau Greg Riwai Black and white digital image Courtesy of Tikidub Productions www.tikidub.com	2007	Joining of hands Graham Hamlin Ink print on paper Private collection	2007
Group gathered round a coffin Frank James Denton Reproduction of original black and white negative Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand Courtesy of Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand	circa 1920-1929	Black and White T.V Reuben Paterson Glitter dust on screen print, edition no. 15 Collection of Barry Pilcher	2005	Jack's story Jack Johnston Reproduction of crayon on paper Private Collection Images courtesy of Nina and Jack Johnston	2008



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Mosaic frieze
Arohanui Hospice patients and staff
Images courtesy of Arohanui Hospice

2003