



The Big Picture a history of New Zealand art since 1642 by Hamish Keith. Auckland: Random House (2007) reprint (2008). RRP \$50.

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Reviewed by Cassandra Fusco.

Have you seen *The Big Picture* reflecting on 'New Zealand art from 1642' (either the book or the TV series) by Hamish Keith? Both are expansive, inclusive and critical. The book, in particular, is a compact art and history resource (with over 300 excellent illustrations contextualised in a lucid narrative, elegantly designed and printed). It brings together a vast amount of information and artworks that reflect the world in which they were made. The content (richly illustrated) consistently contextualises pivotal historical encounters between New Zealand's cultures, the prolonged 'cultural cringe' and its impact on our lives, art and history - in plain speak.

"Art," Keith asserts, "is not made for museums – it's made to be part of people's lives." Accordingly he surveys and muses on New Zealand art from earliest rock drawings to the present day in roughly chronological order, always alert to themes and the way art invokes and provokes more art. The book's first reproduction by Isaac Gilsemans (from Tasman's ship) is, for example, followed by a work by Colin McCahon. The book chapters (like the documentary) enjoy a similar

synthesis. Their titles map the terrain holistically and succinctly: 1. "The World Intrudes"; 2. "Engaging with difference"; 3. "Civilising"; 4. "Reinventing Distance"; 5. "In search of the New", and 6. "The Braided River."

In the last section Keith asserts that once New Zealand art broke free from the stereotypes of 'National Identity', 'Bi-culturalism' and 'Telling Our Stories', a whole new generation of artists began making art untroubled by who or where they are (and irrespective of the dictates and expectations of arts' bureaucracies). Keith asserts that in the work of two such artists, Shane Cotton and Bill Hammond, two great cultural streams coalesce, the Pacific and Chinese, richly flowing into the art of other cultures and making the great braided river of contemporary New Zealand art.

The Big Picture is "a personal view (but not) a subjective view," Keith writes. As a cultural study, it offers reflections of how artists and their works have provided the language that describes the constant and ongoing confluence of old and new cultures in New Zealand. And it is this continual convergence that makes this *Big Picture* a remarkable survey of our arts and cultures and how these relate to the wider world – the bigger picture. Keith concludes on a high note, advising us to stop fretting about place and identity and confront the issues of the larger world, and of the necessity for ongoing interpretation and appreciation of difference. He persuades us to cross influence and enrich each other. So, have you seen it? Are you interested in the bigger picture?