In 2005, in an *Art New Zealand* article on Reuben Paterson, Ngahiraka Mason (Indigenous Curator, Māori Art, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki) wrote this:

> It is hard to resist a suggestion that few writings on contemporary Māori practice acknowledge and accept the range of Māori philosophical thinking and interpretation of the worlds in which they live and move. The New Zealand contemporary art world can be a particularly dogged place of resistance when it comes to understanding why Māori produce artworks that challenge interpretations in Western terms.[1]

Reading this statement at the time of its publication, I was immediately intrigued, and it got me thinking. Returning to it ten years later, I am struck again by its challenge. There is a lot to be extracted from Mason's words. I will use them to guide me in approaching (but not apprehending) Paterson's work.

I have quoted two sentences. In the first, Mason refers to a plurality of Māori 'worlds', and in the second, to a singular, local, contemporary art 'world'. She is suggesting that representatives of the latter, such as critics and curators, do not typically cope with the breadth and depth of the former as expressed in the work of an artist such as Paterson. Some of those art world representatives might bristle at this suggestion, but I am inclined to accept it. Yes, art is one of the most open kinds of activities there is. Think of the range of things that fall within its scope (everything, potentially) and the ideas and issues that are associated with those things. But the methods used to describe and interpret art are relatively limited – necessarily so, really, because we like to be assured that it is art we are talking about and not something else.

Thinking about what goes into the making of just one of Paterson's pictures, one realises that neither art nor any other western construct is big enough, and the chances of adequately accounting for it all in the form of a critical or art historical essay (or book) are slim. If it was merely a matter of identifying Māori motifs, the art writer would be, while not exactly or necessarily on home turf, at least on safe ground; kowhaiwhai forms, for example, are familiar and well-documented. Extending this line of inquiry to Paterson's distinctive treatment of such forms – his use of glitter and a certain garishness – might yield equally familiar narratives of post-modern irony and the erosion of boundaries and distinctions. Indeed, a litany of sources and meanings can be rattled off without stepping outside the 'western terms' Mason refers to. The problem, though, according to my reading of Mason's essay, is that Paterson's work is not just a collection of parts, including Māori motifs alongside or modified by art historical references, appropriated patterns, and so forth. At least, it is only that from the outside, in the art world. For *many* 'worlds' fundamentally shape Paterson's art – bring it into being. Actually, its status as 'art' is not the factor that unifies a multitude of contributing influences. It is, on the contrary, a facet – perhaps a minor facet – of a greater whole constituted through 'Māori philosophical thinking and interpretation'.

Paterson has used the word 'whakapapa' as the title of one of his most ambitious projects, a series of large paintings that can be shown in various configurations, together or separately, and that trace various strands of the artist's lineage. These points of origin and continuity cohere, for Paterson, though they might seem disparate to someone else. It may take time and effort to uncover them, because as they are present, or brought to life by, the visual forms of Paterson's paintings, and those forms are intricate and mobile. 'Everything I've done is moving', Paterson has said.[2] Whakapapa could be described, as Paterson describes his paintings, as 'a connected form of movement', and it is the 'why' part of Mason's argument.

The point about 'understanding why Māori produce artworks that challenge interpretations in Western terms' is interesting too in relation to issues of value and judgement. Paterson's pictures

are confusing because they accommodate conflicting values. From the point of view of art criticism, neither an immediate intuitive 'take', nor a considered unravelling of aesthetic and conceptual layers, will yield a convincing judgement or a set of evaluative criteria. To praise, say, Paterson's audacious use of kitsch and camp within a 'fine art' context, is to have already evaluated such elements – to have assumed that they are 'bad' things made 'good', 'outside' things brought 'inside' – and to have confined Paterson's pictures to their ostensibly unproblematic status as 'art'. Mason, on the other hand, while implying that Paterson does 'produce artworks', argues that he also has grander designs. Taking a crude stab at the problem, I am tempted to say that the pictures are not good simply as art, but as amalgams of all the good things that are, palpably or inconspicuously, *in* them.

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[1] Ngahiraka Mason, 'Open to Interpretation: The Art of Reuben Paterson', *Art New Zealand* 116, Spring 2005, p. 105.

[2] Reuben Paterson, quoted at https://hscvisualartresources.wordpress.com/2012/07/22/reuben-paterson/, retrieved 23 June, 2015.