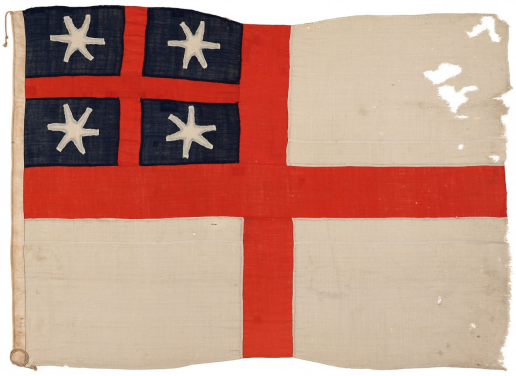
People of *a different* Colour

an informal history of the Mercy Pictures fiasco.



THE BEST ARTISTS are self-serving jerks. They make the best art, and in so doing, they wreak havoc around them. This idea stems from the belief that in art something needs to be broken before something better can be made. It is an old story, and it's peculiar to male artists of a certain generation. It tells of a time when such men held great power. They farted, vomited, fucked, drank copious amounts of alcohol, and shat in the face of public sentiment. That was before the feminisation of New Zealand art exiled their kind and drove them into the wilderness.

In contrast, a compliant, well-behaved, woke-adjacent, risk-averse, socially inclusive middle order of artists has flourished in New Zealand. They find their greatest support on firm ground where the tools of social engineering – tone policing, cultural surveillance, and TikTok – evened the playing field and honoured mediocrity.

This is a generation of artists, mainly millennials, mainly painters, for whom cultural politics continues to armour their work against even the weakest critical pushback. More importantly, this is a cluster of artists for whom the feminisation of New Zealand art has

cast them as ripe young seeds, and they have flourished and grown tall.

Welcome to the state of art in this country, and what has become of it since the Mercy Pictures fiasco rived a deep critical fracture in New Zealand art.

In October 2020, just over five years ago, the exhibition People of Colour, a large installation of 400mm x 240mm sized printed symbols and signs, depicting flags and other visual objects taken from a wide range of sources, was installed at the Auckland artist-run gallery Mercy Pictures. At the time, Mercy Pictures was led by Jerome Ngan-Kee, Teghan Burt, and Jonny Prasad, who, as art students, met at Elam. Following the opening, the show was met with excitement and wide acclaim. Well-connected curators spoke of installing the work in major galleries; a prominent NZ art dealer unofficially committed to buying a whole wall of the extensive work, and well-placed art patrons and collectors voiced support for the work.

Despite its initial positive reception, two days before the scheduled close of the show, a number of competing artists judged that People of Colour deeply offended their cultural and racial sensibilities. They quickly instigated a public campaign to discredit the show by claiming that it wilfully and uncaringly assembled a number of painful historical associations – cultural, religious, and racial – and this should be called out.

Installing certain images in close proximity to others – such as Nazi imagery placed next to *te Kara o He Whakaputanga o te Rangatiratanga o Nu Tireni* – incited deep cultural offence. Although many of the alleged placement and proximity claims were false, being made and repeated by people who had not seen the show, a fire had been ignited and it quickly took hold of Auckland's art community.

A campaign of public outrage spread quickly when certain artists turned to the press with their complaints. The incendiary effectiveness of this exploded with such intensity that many New

Zealand art professionals could do little more than scramble for cover to quietly conceal just how much they had openly supported People of Colour and how easily they had been caught out.

Accepting their moral error and pleading guilty to all charges, others who had initially voiced support for People of Colour turned to social media and the theatre of public contrition to offer up tokens of shame and remorse. Others – including myself – defiantly ignored the professional consequences of cancellation and pushed back with our own writings. We did so in the belief that although we believed that the sentiments and claims of social and racial justice were worthy, it was the online violence that the conflict had ignited and how easily it was fuelled by poor readings of mid-century French philosophy, American Critical Race Theory, and Decolonisation Theory tacked onto revisionist historiographies of post-Treaty New Zealand. This allowed any argument for the probity of social justice concerns to be reduced to a series of catch-phrase abbreviations, pithy accusations, and online virtue signalling.

By this time, however, it was clear that the Enlightenment principles of free speech that once ruled the political left, and the freedoms that it guaranteed artists to do and say what ever they wanted, had been assaulted and chronically weakened. The Overton window had shifted, as had the moral compass of New Zealand art.

Coupled with an untethered stampede of public outcry and the professional cancellation of anyone who did not fall into line, it became evident that the whole Mercy Pictures fiasco was flawed with contradictions that served only the personal ambitions of those leading the outrage parade and those beating the drums the loudest.

Sensing how effectively the socially engineered shift towards woke idealism could serve them, upstart artists (Corson-Scott), opportunist dealers (Hopkinson), and other hangers-on (Satele) pounced. Flaunting the unexpected visibility that their social media postings and support for their writings on the matter had given them, they were quick to capitalise on the crisis. Others, who believed that the old guard of New Zealand art had treated them

badly by ignoring their art and identities, saw with gleeful delight how quickly People of Colour fell and how mortally Mercy Pictures was wounded.

In denouncing the most important features of the show – the artists' provocative choice of iconography – and with blood in the water, a flurry of social media memes quickly exploded into an all-out attack against the old ways. Treating People of Colour as a symptom of cultural ignorance and corrupt social biases, it was easy to denounce the arguments and anyone who continued to support the show or attempted to steel-man its intentions. Accelerated by the algorithmic force of their postings, a new crop of artists and curators revelled in the violence with which their social justice mandate could be enforced.

Mainstream New Zealand art responded by either keeping just out of range or voicing mannered disappointment. This meant that the Mercy Pictures kids could be thrown into the deep end and told to either swim or drown. They drowned.

The hidden implication of this was that as far as public sentiment and Mercy Pictures were concerned, it served them fucking well right for being so dumb and overreaching so far. When this was said out loud, it was spoken with the conviction that the speaker had joined a social justice parade that marched on the right side of moral law. Any voice speaking against them would not be tolerated and would be silenced with a barrage of social media postings and the threat of cancellation.

The whole fiasco further accelerated the claim that the culture of New Zealand art had changed from a racist and sexist one of Eurocentric white privilege that tacitly ennobled white male artists, to one in which women's values, indigenous concerns, and gender dysphoria could be dignified. This allowed the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion to be injected into the lifeblood of New Zealand art, and to be done so without question.

A panicked curatorial shift from the old ways meant that participants in the public theatre of woke moral agency could be

easily rewarded. Artists could present themselves as fearless social justice warriors whose work amplified once-muted voices and sharpened the narrative edge of identity politics. More importantly for them, it elevated their own professional status and widened their influence.

A cadre of emerging millennial artists, writers, and curators crowded the New Zealand art scene. Their new moral compass would guide them across even ground upon which no white male artist would stand above them. On this fresh fertile ground a new order of artistic intention could burgeon and rise up to favour a growing diversity of artists.

In the immediate wake of the Mercy Pictures collapse, a number of social media postings and screen dumps of personal emails – rich with complaints against white male artists – appeared on Instagram.

With born-again zeal and their emotions turned way up high, a small but vocal group of *wāhine toa* artists took to social media to decry what they saw as the old ways and the telling of old stories. This mausoleum of memories served little more than the Eurocentric white male dominance of the art world. For them, People of Colour had become the metonymic index of colonisation.

Many of the images and placements in People of Colour pressed all the wrong buttons, because they signalled historical pain, the destruction of tribal *mana,* and the wilful violation of *tikanga Māori* by European colonisers. They were a new generation of Māori women artists determined to set things straight, whatever the collateral cost to their male Pākehā adversaries.

For them, the cruelty and violence of the Mercy Pictures takedown was just part of a wider and justifiable cultural and racial revolution. They demanded that cultural reparation (*utu*) be made and personal revenge (*uto*) enacted. [1] As a consequence, the Mercy Pictures kids would be publicly sacrificed on the altar of moral rectitude, draped in the shroud of Pākehā guilt.

AS WITH MANY unplanned revolutions intent on prolonging their power, this one quickly adopted the same discriminatory attitudes it had initially opposed. Anyone who questioned the new order or pointed out its hypocrisies was seen to tacitly deny the moral primacy of social justice. They were swiftly marginalised, silenced, or cancelled.

In the hysteria of change, anyone who challenged this reversal was labelled “racist” or “misogynist” and therefore made an easy target for rage-bait postings. Well-reasoned dissent was deemed heretical, and its protagonists attacked online. In this culture of grievance, an online accusation was as good as a conviction.

The once privileged white male artist was now underprivileged. White male artists and writers, especially the most outspoken ones, would quietly be dropped from mailing lists, left out of shows, and blacklisted from CNZ funding opportunities. The places left vacant could now be filled by women, Indigenous artists, and minorities, often doubling their inclusion in big shows. This was diversity, equity, and inclusion at its finest.

Without quite realising it, straight white male artists had unwittingly become the characters in a tired old play that required urgent rescripting, especially if it was to please new, younger audiences. Yet, the tactic of marginalising white artists and quieting their voices was not straightforward. This is because the gendered and racial revision of art culture in the twenty-first century has not been without its own contradictions, hypocrisies, and petty power games, that are peculiar to women’s undertakings.

If nothing else became more evident, the incendiary reaction to People of Colour made visible the institutional rise of women to new roles with new powers in the New Zealand art community. The feminisation of art had widened.

With the spread of the sort of horizontal violence often seen in women-intensive milieux, it was clear that any abjuration of women’s values and social justice imperatives would be punishable by expulsion from the group.

By this stage, the "group" was the whole of New Zealand art, or at least those parts of the community that were managed by women. The horizontal violence against certain white male artists now extended from the petty removal of names from mailing lists to being quietly delisted from shows that their work may otherwise have been included. Any offenders choosing to disrespect the new *kaupapa* – always white, always male, always straight – would be quietly driven out or ignored. Such is the subtlety with which women can exercise their power, and to do so without ever having to acknowledge it directly.

American writer and cultural commentator Kat Rosenfield recalls: "Just under ten years ago, there was this glut of overt, like belligerent, gleeful discriminatory sentiment against white men specifically… it was everywhere, it was palpable, you could not but help be aware of it all … and you weren't allowed to push back against this or even acknowledge it without being called a racist. [2]

The fear held by many (men) who pushed back against gendered woke determinism was that any art culture from which the principles of risk and critical enquiry had been expunged would stagnate and within a generation would become irredeemably boring. So far this is true.

It then begs the question: why has the critical edge of New Zealand art all but disappeared, and what has caused it? In a recent essay, American author Helen Andrews discussed the feminisation of culture and the divergent ways in which men and women approach criticism.

In women-managed groups, Andrews observes, "… any criticism or negative sentiment, if it absolutely must be expressed, needs to be buried in layers of compliments. The outcome of a discussion is less important than the fact that a discussion was held and everyone participated in it."

Andrews continues: "The most important sex difference in group dynamics is attitude to conflict. In short, men wage conflict openly while women covertly undermine or ostracise their enemies." [3]

“Participation” and “group inclusion” would now mean that all voices will be heard, all identities acknowledged, and all opinions respected. But this entails a sort of moral relativism which is anathema to any incisive analysis of art. In feminised art communities, like New Zealand, if you are a critic and you think an artist’s work sucks, you can’t directly say how or ask why. You have to be nice about the artist, respect their gender, acknowledge their race, and honour their identity. The meaning of any work of art is relative to the culture, gender, race, or identity of an artist and their cultural milieu. But this is an analytical requirement that forms a sort of exogenic skin that has to be verbally grafted onto their work.

Such is the tyranny of extrinsic narrative, and how effectively it covers over whatever a work of art may otherwise have to say for itself, good or bad. The consequences of this are that too much ordinary art and too many over-chuffed artists and curators have risen in stature and public visibility to levels of acceptance that would otherwise lie well above their natural abilities. We saw this in the immediate wake of the Mercy Pictures collapse.

One of the unforeseen consequences of moral relativism loosely repackaged as DEI is that the meaning of art could focus more on who or what a work represents rather than on what the work is or has to say for itself. In such a tightly controlled world, axiology has replaced ontology. With this shift, the meaning and value of art are relative to the intentions and identity of the artist. This used to be called the argument from intentionality.

This belief gives protective armour to the sort of art that would naturally be vulnerable to critical scrutiny. Artists whose work is trivial, ordinary, or straight-out boring can claim their identity and diversity as a powerful cover narrative, which will armour their work against critical attack. An extrinsic cover narrative, that speaks with the authority, power, and intensity of a highly regarded identity politic, can elevate lesser work to high levels of mainstream acceptance.

Where there is politics, there is language. Where there is language, there are vocal subjects who will voice their own cognitive biases. It doesn't take much to conclude that when politics is in play in art, there will be significant cultural biases driving the machinery. The proof of this is ostensive.

When art politics becomes visible, there will be the personal interests of artists, collectors, investors, curators, and writers that will raise above others and claim the authority of whomever declares them. This begs another question: what force allows an artist, curator, institution, or gallery to rise above others, to don the mantle of truth and to wear the crown of authority?

The thought is that once women were able to play on a level playing field, they would out-compete men, gain the power to uphold women's values and instantiate the prowess of feminisation.

Helen Andrews disagrees: "Feminization [sic] is not an organic result of women outcompeting men. It is an artificial result of social engineering, and if we take our thumb off the scale it will collapse within a generation."

Undoubtedly, such forces still pervade the New Zealand art world and they can be extremely nuanced and covert. But when force becomes political in art, it also becomes extrinsic to the object. In my parlance, this means that when art becomes political, its meaning is determined by an authority that is ontologically extrinsic to the art "itself." When an external authority speaks against a work of art, it is likely that what the art may have to say for itself will go unheard, being shouted down by louder voices proclaiming different values. This is what happened to People of Colour when an unruly authority firmly pressed its thumb hard down on the scale, then went looking for blood.

Artists, curators, institutions, and gallerists all have their own interests to promote and protect. So when the authority of woke determinism reared its head against People of Colour, the threat of

cancellation and art world rejection turned on anyone who didn't fall in line.

Having seen it all before on a number of battlefields, a few old warriors stood up to face Goliath. I was one of them. We had a point to make about the fight against censorship, of the importance of critical engagement in art, and of being part of an art community that is mature enough to steel-man any work, no matter how offensive it is deemed by a wound-up multitude. What was there to lose?

Besides, who would be willing to recognise the medals that artists and writers from another tribe had earned in other conflicts, so what the hell?

We held the belief that even if the consequences of breaking the rules were to poison their reputations, artists should still be given the licence to do so. Risk and social defiance still make the best art because such art is born of singular occurrences that blow away all that has gone before.

But this thinking is wishful. Even if an artist is prepared to take the hemlock of professional euthanasia, as Socrates most famously did, it usually entails the hope that in the end everything will come right. This hides a delusion often held by old warriors that legacy, vindication, or even posthumous moral victory will be enough to satisfy the ego. That the ego could be larger in death than it is in life is a fantasy held only by the living. TNTL Julian! WTF Billy®?

He iti te ao Māori. *He iti te ao* Pākehā.

IT'S A BIG WORLD out there, and the devastation of global war looms large. Big world wars will make the Mercy Pictures fiasco look puny, and concerns about the feminisation of New Zealand art seem pathetic. Battle dragons are flying, and there's nothing anyone can do about it.

Men will sing songs of their victory in battle, well before they fall. If you are going to go down in battle, then do so while fighting and for as long as you're still standing. Women may blame men for their tyrannical natures and the stupidity with which they will start wars, but sadly, both men and women will go to the next one, and feminist contempt of male power can do little to stop it. No proclamation of women's values will stop any war that is driven by the madness of men and their determination to be victors.

Some solace may be found in the thought that time is a dimension which, when battle looms, is often overlooked. The belief that time will turn in our favour because we are the only ones who are morally intact is a fantasy of empowerment held only by the righteous. But righteousness also drove the beliefs that emboldened the millennials who took down Mercy Pictures.

These are different times. The world has changed so rapidly and to such an extent in the last five years that no one knows what the hell will happen next. Bewilderment abounds, and the thought that our politicians and institutional leaders can do anything other than enrich their own personal interests is a dismal consequence of our own personal powerlessness.

I still look for art that reaches into the void and touches something singular. Even if it has to invent a whole new language to do so, when such art speaks for itself, it will do it in defiance of any avarice and opposing self-interests that may rise up to smother its spark so that lesser works may appear to shine brighter.

Rest in peace, Mercy Pictures. Your passing is a lesson to us all.

Return to main page www.terrence.org

Notes:

[1] In her book *Taua: 'Musket Wars,' 'Land Wars,' or Tikanga?,* historian Angela Ballara points out a general misuse of *ngā kupu Māori e rua,* "*utu*" *me* "*uto.*" She translates these words as "reparation" and "revenge," respectively.

[2] Transcribed from the podcast *Feminine Chaos*: a series of conversations between culture writers Kat Rosenfield and Phoebe Maltz Bovy. Posted 8 January 2026, under the title, *Men Who Deserve a Fruit Basket.* Rosenfield went on to clarify why cancelled white men may be called "racist."

[3] Helen Andrews, *The Great Feminization*, Compact Magazine, 16 October 2026. https://www.compactmag.com/article/the-great-feminization/

See also Andrews' *Boomers: The Men and Women Who Promised Freedom and Delivered Disaster* (New York: Portfolio, Penguin Random House, 2025), ISBN: 9798217184231