
The exploitation, repatriation, and memorialisation of human remains: An artist's experiences

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Abstract

In recent years I have been invited by the Hokotehi Moriori Trust of Rēkohu (Chatham Islands or Wharekauri) to develop concept designs for a memorial to house the skeletal remains of repatriated karāpuna Moriori (Moriori ancestors indigenous to Rēkohu). From the second half of the nineteenth century, Moriori remains were taken from their homeland and distributed widely in museum and private collections around the world, including The Natural History Museum in London and New Zealand museums. In the context of a repatriation and reconciliation ceremony at Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa in 2022, The Natural History Museum's director Dr Doug Gurr acknowledged: “[r]espect and responsibility towards the remains of the deceased are important for us all, and we understand the importance of the return of the ancestors to the care of their communities as part of a process of healing and reconciliation.”

Involvement in this repatriation project has led me to reflect upon my experiences with human skeletons and, most particularly, skulls. Coincidentally, the use of a human skull – in my possession for about 45 years – as an anatomical reference in a current work, has reignited for me ethical issues regarding guardianship of human remains. This article discusses my personal experiences with human skeletal remains in relation to historical and contemporary conventions concerning their use in cultural contexts. These experiences include being the designer of the tomb of New Zealand's unknown warrior, witnessing the exhumation of a soldier from a First World War battlefield in Belgium, encountering a suicide exhibit in Germany's military history museum in Dresden, and reflections on the use of human skulls by artists exhibiting at the Tate Modern in the 21st century.

Keywords: exhumation, human skulls, memorial, Moriori, repatriation of human remains, tomb of the unknown warrior

In July 2022 I attended a repatriation and reconciliation ceremony at Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. During this event, the museum received 111 Kōimi T'chakat Moriori (Moriori skeletal remains) and two Māori ancestral remains from London's Natural History Museum, along with the remains of almost 200 karāpuna (Moriori ancestors) from New Zealand museums.¹ From the mid-1860s extensive illicit collection, trade, and research saw Moriori skeletal remains from Rēkohu (Chatham Islands or Wharekauri) end up in museum and private collections on the mainland of Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally.² Currently, Te Papa cares for repatriated ancestral remains with provenance to Rēkohu, an archipelago in the Pacific Ocean located 800 kilometres east of New Zealand's South Island and home to the Moriori people for at least 800 years. It is intended that the remains of karāpuna Moriori will be returned to Rēkohu to be placed in a memorial for which the Hokotehi Moriori Trust invited me to develop concept designs.

Figure 1. Maui Solomon and Te Arikirangi Mamaku lead the delegation on to Te Papa's marae, carrying the karāpuna (Moriori ancestors). Repatriation Ceremony, July 2022. Photo by Te Papa (206620).



Figure 2. Open Tomb of the Unknown Warrior containing a casket with the skeletal remains of a First World War New Zealand soldier, Pukeahu National War Memorial, Wellington, New Zealand, 11 November 2004. Photo: David Straight.



A memorial to karāpuna Mōriori is not the first time I have been involved in a repatriation project, nor designed a final resting place for human remains. In 2004 I was commissioned to design a tomb for New Zealand's unknown warrior. That year, the remains of a First World War soldier were disinterred from Caterpillar Valley Cemetery in France, and returned to New Zealand to be reburied in the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior at the National War Memorial in Wellington. In order to qualify for selection, the soldier had to be a New Zealander, and his personal identity unknown. As the "foremost symbol of remembrance for all New Zealanders who did not make the journey home after serving their country overseas," anonymity is essential.³

Figure 3. Disinterment of a First World War British soldier by "The Diggers." Boezinge, Belgium, 16 June 2007. Photo: Kingsley Baird.



While it is necessary to maintain the anonymity of the human remains contained in the tombs of unknowns, the hope of discovering the identities of exhumed soldiers and providing them with a final resting place among their comrades under a named headstone, is a motivation for “The Diggers,” a group of dedicated, amateur archaeologists in Belgium.

While undertaking an artist’s residency at In Flanders Fields Museum in Belgium in 2007, I was invited to attend the recovery of the remains of a First World War soldier from a cleared field near the town of Boezinge destined for industrial use. Earthworks undertaken at a former battle site such as this require caution because of the possibility of uncovering unexploded bombs. The metal detectors of The Diggers had revealed the probable presence of human remains about half a metre below the surface.

First, The Diggers discovered a water canteen, then part of a human skull. Slowly and carefully they revealed a pelvis, then the bones of the legs, ribs, and arms. My newly arrived companions from a bus tour and I stood enthralled as The Diggers continued their delicate operation.

With the darkened bones were remnants of uniform material – which disintegrated when handled – and some dark hair from around the skull. Because his skeleton lay in a British trench from the 1915 lines, it is considered very likely that he was a British soldier. As more clues appeared, The Diggers detective work refined. A whistle lying amongst the bones suggested these were the remains of an officer. The respectful approach with which these weekend archaeologists undertook their mission was not diminished by the ninety years that separated them from this man’s violent death. We privileged witnesses stood in collective silence seeing not a skeleton but a fellow human.

Amongst the soldier’s remains was a pocket watch. This and other ‘evidence’ would be taken away from the scene for police forensic testing. Once opened, the watch might reveal who the buried soldier was. Confirming his identity would determine whether his name was carved into a Commonwealth War Graves headstone or the words, “A soldier of the Great War Known unto God”.⁴

As with the unknown warrior, the following examples concern the use of human skeletal remains as symbols. The first, presumably, a representation of the horror of war and, perhaps, intended as a blurring of the dualism of perpetrator and victim. In 2014 I was invited to make a sculpture commemorating the First World War’s centenary at Germany’s Museum of Military History in Dresden. Over the days I constructed the sculpture on site, I became familiar with the museum’s collection on display. On the top floor was the skull of a Second World War German soldier. It was displayed very discretely in a cabinet out of direct public view; a gesture, I interpreted, of respect for both the individual and the visitors to the museum.

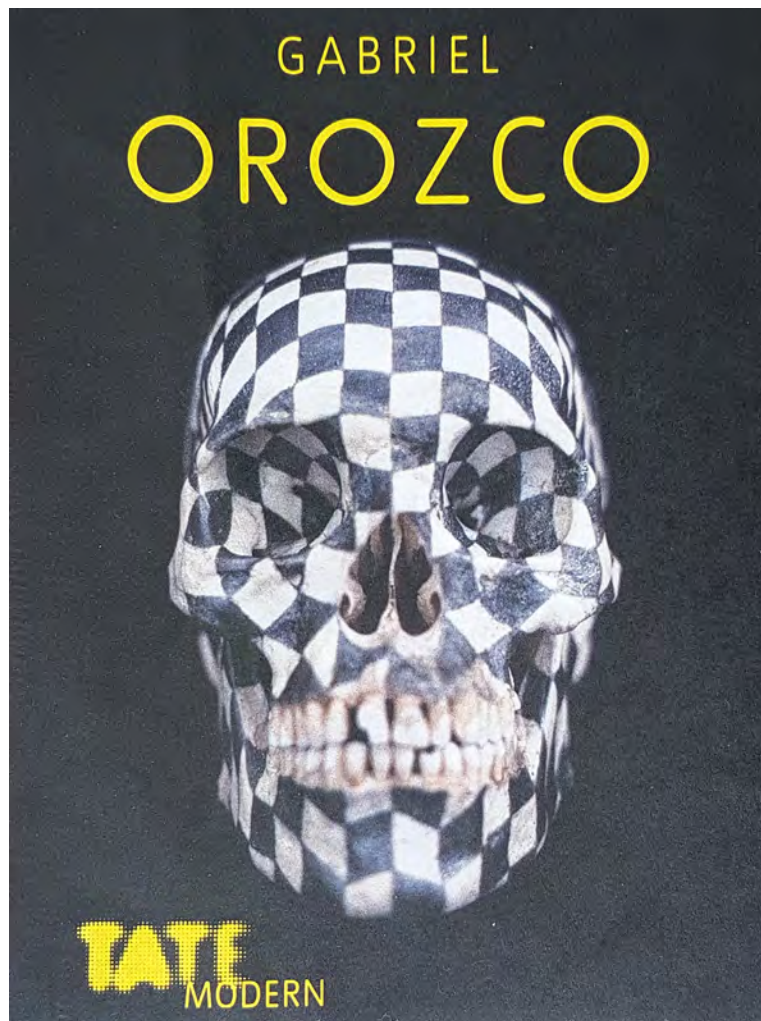
Figure 4. Human skull,
Militärhistorisches Museum der
Bundeswehr, Dresden, Germany.
Photo: MHM / David Brandt.



The exhibit's dispassionate and factual caption read:

Skull of a soldier who committed suicide by shooting himself in the mouth with a 7.9 mm shell... The name of the soldier is unknown. He is only known to have committed suicide in World War II. To do so, he first filled his mouth with water. He then shot himself in the mouth. This caused the water to explode and completely destroy his skull.⁵

Figure 5. Gabriel Orozco exhibition pamphlet. Cover image: *Black kites* (1997). Human skull, graphite pencil. Photo of pamphlet: Kingsley Baird. Image © Tate.



The skull in Western art is used as a symbol of death, a reminder of its inevitability, and the ephemerality of human life. It is a commonly found motif in *memento mori* and *vanitas* paintings and sculptures.

In the 2011 Tate Modern *Everyday poetics* retrospective exhibition of Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco, the accompanying free pamphlet described his *Black kites* (1997) sculpture as representing “one of Orozco’s most striking uses of a found object, in this case a human skull.”⁶ Of the many significant works in Orozco’s exhibition, an image of the *Black kites* sculpture was chosen for the cover of the pamphlet. The Tate Modern is aware of the compelling nature of death. For the artist, it was important to work with something “real” associated with death; conveying a confrontation with mortality, including, possibly, Orozco’s own.⁷

Fig. 6. Kingsley Baird.
Armageddon, detail, work
in progress (2023). Bronze.
Photo: William Baird.



Meanwhile, the pamphlet's authors characterise the work in aesthetic terms – including its “elegance and beauty” – and process, describing the artist's time-consuming drawing of a chequerboard pattern with a graphite pencil over the surface of “this fundamental element of death.”⁸

A year later, also at the Tate Modern, I saw another human skull artwork, this time by British artist, Damien Hirst. The *For the Love of God* (2007) sculpture comprises a platinum cast of an eighteenth century human skull, covered by diamonds, and, the original skull's teeth. According to the Tate Modern, *For the Love of God*, “represents the artist's continued interest in mortality and notions of value.”⁹

The skulls of the suicide in Dresden's Museum of Military History, Orozco's *Black kites*, and Hirst's *For the Love of God*, are employed for their symbolic value. While I meditate upon my own complicity in the trade of human remains, I wonder if the museum curators and the two artists – and, indeed, the visitors to these exhibitions – reflected on the humanity of the skulls, thought about to whom they belonged, and about the lives their owners had led.

Endnotes

1. Te Papa. "Largest-ever repatriation of Moriori ancestral remains." Accessed August 14, 2022. <https://www.tepapa.govt.nz/about/press-and-media/press-releases/2022-media-releases/largest-ever-repatriation-moriori-ancestral>
2. Ibid.
3. Manatū Taonga Ministry for Culture and Heritage. "Pukeahu National War Memorial Park: Tomb of the Unknown Warrior." Accessed August 14, 2022. <https://mch.govt.nz/pukeahu/park/national-war-memorial/tomb#:~:text=The%20Tomb%20of%20the%20Unknown%20Warrior%20is%20New%20Zealand%27s%20foremost,after%20serving%20their%20country%20overseas.>
4. An extended description of this event can be found in Kingsley Baird, *Diary Dagboek: 2007 Artist in residence In Flanders Fields Museum* (Ieper: In Flanders Fields Museum, 2007), 50-56.
5. Display caption. Militärhistorisches Museum der Bundeswehr, Dresden, Germany.
6. Tate Modern. *Gabriel Orozco* 2011 exhibition pamphlet. Leaflet text: Simon Bolitho, Iria Candela, and Minnie Scott.
7. Noah Becker. *Whitehot magazine of contemporary art*. Accessed August 29, 2022. <https://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/2011-gabriel-orozco-tate-modern/2237>.
8. Tate Modern. *Gabriel Orozco*, 2011
9. Tate Modern. "Damien Hirst's iconic For the Love of God to be shown in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. Accessed August 29, 2022. <https://www.tate.org.uk/press/press-releases/damien-hirsts-ionic-love-god-be-shown-tate-moderns-turbine-hall#:~:text=Since%20it%20was%20first%20exhibited,mortality%20and%20notions%20of%20value.>
A photo of For the Love of God can be found at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/For_the_Love_of_God#/media/File:Hirst-Love-Of-God.jpg.

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Tate Modern. *Gabriel Orozco* (exhibition pamphlet), 2011.

Tate Modern. “Damien Hirst’s iconic For the Love of God to be shown in Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall. Accessed August 29, 2022. <https://www.tate.org.uk/press/press-releases/damien-hirsts-iconic-love-god-be-shown-tate-moderns-turbine-hall#:~:text=Since%20it%20was%20first%20exhibited,mortality%20and%20notions%20of%20value>.

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Biographical Note

Kingsley Baird is a visual artist and writer examining memory, memorialisation, and remembrance – primarily in relation to war, national identity, mythology, and place. This investigation is undertaken through the design of commissioned public memorials and making artefacts exploring new conceptual, aesthetic, and material ways of creating memory forms.

<https://www.kingsleybaird.com>

k.w.baird@massey.ac.nz