

Jessicoco Hansell

Tricksters
& Mischief
Makers

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“What tricksters quite regularly do is create lively talk where there has been silence, or where speech has been prohibited. Trickster speaks freshly where language has been blocked, gone, dead, or lost its charm...usually language goes dead because cultural practice has hedged it in, and some shameless double-dealer is needed to get outside the rules and set tongues wagging again.”

Lewis Hyde, ‘Trickster Makes This World’

Having been called both in my time, I’ve come to learn that being thought of as a *‘trickster’* is a much deeper affair than simply being called a tricky character. For some it’s an insult, but in my circles it’s a pretty relishable accusation and thankfully how I got invited into the *Mischief Makers* exhibition at Pātaka Art + Museum.

Traversing various cultures, ages and lore (including numerous Māori and Pasifika traditions) the trickster emerges a precious archetype and provocative mode that goes way back. French philosopher Michel de Certeau says these people “use impersonation, disguise, theft, and deceit to expose hypocrisy and inequality, to subvert existing social systems, and to widen the sphere of power”.

A Trickster is the epitome of 'both/and', meaning they can easily (even festively) encompass two truths or extremes within the one ambiguous ambassador. This can be to the chagrin of those who struggle to trust modalities such as change, conflict, paradox, transition or fluidity. Those who don't have the stomach for cosmic pranks or satire in visceral motion will also be unsettled by the trickster's sacred role. But cosmic pranks are the buffet bread and butter of the trickster. I find when one crosses my path I'm destined to compute them cautiously but ultimately be schooled by their avant garde relationship with truth. Whether I signed up for it or not, I usually end up either falling head over heels for these historical characters OR cringing my way through their bungling genius. It's usually a mixture of both, as no one humiliates futile binaries like the trickster.

A polarising fav and trickster go-to in the South Pacific is local demigod Māui-Tikitiki-a-Taranga, often our first introduction to the idea Oceania-side. And Māui is indeed a most worthy representative of the productive mischief maker. Who else do you know that could fish up our fair nation with their grandmother's jawbone (this is after scamming her out of all ten of her fire-giving nails) while slowing the turbo sun in ropes before his optimistic demise crushed in the obsidian toothed vagina of Hine-nui-te-Po (because he couldn't resist a cheeky attempt at cheating death). This is a platinum trickster whose obnoxious antics proved hectic but fruitful for my people to say the least.

William Anderson writes:

For every good aspect of his persona, there is an equal and opposite aspect. In religious stories, his role is very diverse. He is the breaker of taboos. He provides comic relief to a religious myth. And he will pull off elaborate schemes to teach a moral lesson or expose the folly of men¹.

This may be true to character, however tricksters transcend Anderson's gendered assumptions too. In her 1998 book *'Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women: The Female Trickster in American Culture'* Lori Landay writes:

The term "trickster" originates in Daniel Brinton's 1868 study of the contradictory figure of Native American tales and myth, who is both fooler and fooled, heroic and base. By the end of the nineteenth century, the term was widely used in anthropology and folklore scholarship. In general, trickster figures are representations of liminality, duality, subversion, and irony.

Within these academic worlds she writes how the female trickster emerges as a potent combination of

deception, thievery, and disguise with a startling ability to disrupt and expose as illogical the sex-gender system. Female tricksters present a chance to understand the gender system through imagining what tactics are necessary to escape the system as well as the factors which prevent that escape. In short, female tricksters are fantasy figures, who present tactics of resistance, self-preservation, and self definition that could be used in everyday life.

1 "Carl Jung's Archetype: The Trickster," 2019.

In the world of Batman, there is also the popular assumption that The Joker is the ultimate Gotham City trickster, but Landay makes the fascinating case that it is in fact Catwoman who typifies the archetype as the quintessential “creative non-victim.”

Although some female tricksters are comic heroines, the female trickster is not necessarily a comic figure. Catwoman’s jokes demonstrate the radical rejection of societal conventions which accompany her transformation into an outlaw. Remember: in the movie, Catwoman is a villain, albeit a sympathetically portrayed one. She plots and acts to bring about the downfall of Batman, whom she hates because as a hero he stands for “good” and she wants to destroy anything connected with the system of rules that failed her.

Catwoman’s sense of humor is located in the liminal territory between feminine cheer and female rage; her forays into violent behavior begin and end on that bisociation of comedy and anger. In other words, she is the “bad cat” who lurks in the background of the screwball world...

Featured in the Pātaka exhibition (and apparently what qualifies me as a trickster and mischief maker in this instance) is *Aroha Bridge*. The show has always aimed to destabilise and weaponise conversations about race in Aotearoa through what is the deceptive childhood innocence of cartoons and false comfort of comedy. By normalising the jarring adult chemistry and racial tension I see everyday, I feel the trickster is already inherent just within the vehicle itself. By also giving each member of the Hook family a different cultural metaphor to be expanded or restricted by, we’re saying that how a trickster

manifests their power is always dependent on their social conditions, their privilege, their historical context and their generation. Trouble-makers needn't resemble one another, we each have a puzzle piece and role to play. In this spirit, our amazing animation team created a visual word enriched with in-joke unease, easter egg codes and cultural subversion too.

While exploring cartoons as a weapon of choice, I'm reminded of another trickster feline. In the 1996 essay by Patricia Vettel Tom "Felix the Cat as Modern Trickster" for *American Art*, there is a detailed breakdown of animation as the 'low-brow high-art' mule of culture and context. Using Felix the 1920's cult cartoon as case-study, Tom writes:

Felix the Cat who lacked a space of his own and who thus had to rely on his own cunning and deceit to maneuver his way through the established social order, demonstrated a similar tactic. Like the consumer in a commodity-based society, Felix had to make choices based on what was available to him.

Felix broke through the constraints dictated by society, as well as those imposed by the machine — by industrialization and the mechanization of labour. Yet as an animated character, Felix also represented the machine itself.

With music however, I always (like always) return to the ultimate thief in the temple and one of my favourite pop tricksters, Prince. He was obscuring his face in chainmail to both confront and appeal to his industry headaches (*My Name is Prince* 1992), changing his name to *The Artist Formerly Known as Prince* so as to usurp and troll his label Warner Brothers, or writing SLAVE on his face much to the amusement of the 1993 consumers (many of which read his motives as dramatic

and post-heyday pretention). At the 1999 Yahoo Online Music Awards, Prince was presenting the 'Online Pioneer' award to Public Enemy. With the internet only just beginning its torrential reign, Prince unfashionably and casually warned:

"It's cool to get on the computer, but don't let the computer get on you. It's cool to use the computer, don't let the computer use you. Y'all saw The Matrix. There's a war going on. The battlefield's in the mind. And the prize is the soul. So just be careful. Be very careful".

To me these are all stellar examples of the trickster in service to the bigger picture. Taking what looks like multiple corny 'L's at the time, to me they now all read as cavalier and tasteful prophecies. He had his trickster fails for sure, but we can now see Prince's words ring true in the inescapable and addictive algorithm age that still hunts and harvests vulnerable talent.

The trickster is an unnerving anomaly spanning history, whether it be the revered Native American coyote, Loki the Norse God of Mischief, or The Fool tarot card that tumbles ever-liberated from the deck. The trickster archetype possesses oppositions with a distinct lack of pretense, even awareness. They themselves do not care for the splintering theatre they cause, or the baggage of being 'paradoxical'. This is for those outside of themselves to reconcile with. The trickster archetype is merely the unassuming goader or curator. What manifests from their 'work' is usually beyond their control or whim, to the point that even their own triumph and enjoyment isn't a must. A chaos agent with a fluid sense of what agency means, art made in this vein is collective alchemy. It is a random exposure of the psyche and disorder by divine order.

