

Signed, Theo Schoon

A feature documentary from Aotearoa NZ



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Signed, Theo Schoon

Logline

An intensely artistic soul is raised in the East, trained in the West, and replanted in the South. His artistic spirit guided him to cultural camaraderie, a strong liaison with the Māori community and the landscape - the legacy is re-considered.

Short synopsis: In the context of New Zealand culture in the second half of the 20th century The Dutch émigré Theo Schoon (1915 – 1985) rocked our world. For all the 'noise' that has surrounded Schoon the personality – as in mad, bad and dangerous to know, the artist that emerges from this film is one who gave infinitely more than he took.

Signed, Theo Schoon, grew from a popular biography of the artist Theo Schoon by Damian Skinner and a subsequent touring exhibition titled *Split Level View Finder*. Kim Hill interviewing Damian here: <https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/saturday/audio/2018671643/damian-skinner-profile-of-artist-theo-schoon>

While the film draws from both the biography and the exhibition, it takes a significantly different path as it traverses the social and cultural landscapes from the late 30s through to Schoon's death in the mid 80s.

The film explores a gradual re-assessment of Theo's involvement in NZ art; his influence on some of the country's major visual artists - both Pakeha and Māori - as well as the crafts community ensuring a little known but enduring legacy.

This is a redressing of forgetfulness where we have bypassed his role in a series of major issues with artists working in the visual, musical, Māori arts - the issues that arose remain a source of fascination for writers, art historians and Māori people themselves. This is a thread throughout the film that gives visibility to outstanding and important people who have continued to contribute to shape this country's culture.

As the arc light of the debate has swung back onto Schoon, a young openly gay artist who came to this country in the late thirties his journey and discoveries, contentious though they may be today, were decisive to the point they affected change for both individuals and the culture. Theo was the hinge around which others swung into a deeper appreciation of the New Zealand experience.

There is no doubt that Schoon was arrogant, complex - the question one must ask is, was he always arrogant and complex or maybe the very conservative monocultural culture that he first encountered contributed to the shaping of his personality.

Whilst the central pivot for the documentary is Schoon, the film is a much broader story which illustrates our important cultural history and helps us to better know who we are, and where we have come from.

Longer Synopsis

Damian Skinner's book *Theo Schoon: A Biography* is a major inspiration for the film ***Signed, Theo Schoon***, rather than an adaptation or a conventional biopic Schoon tells his own story through letters, recordings and beautiful archival footage allowing him to become the primary narrator AND story teller.

The film is an exploration of the effect the pioneering work of an outsider had, and still has on the New Zealand cultural landscape. Through that lens, it explores the New Zealand context from Schoon's arrival from Indonesia shortly before the second world war until his premature death in the mid 1980s.

Signed, Theo Schoon introduces an influential and at times controversial artist, designer and craftsman to a broad spectrum of viewers by revealing the natural, social and cultural landscapes he lived in, engaged with and challenged. The documentary traverses the cultural and physical landscapes of New Zealand, with side trips to Schoon's beloved Indonesia during a time of major cultural and political changes.

Schoon's importance and his influence are reflected now in many ways. His work continues to appear for sale while he continues to be referenced in the work of major artists, such as Michael Parekowhai.

His is an important and dynamic story which expands our knowledge of our cultural history just as BWX achieved previously with the film *the heART of the matter*.

Schoon was quintessentially a Bauhaus man, whose interests encompassed Javanese dance and music, painting, printmaking, photography, ceramics and jade and gourd carving. As Schoon questioned the existing European and Māori visual arts canons in search of a modernism his own outsider eye and heart felt Aotearoa New Zealand deserved to reinvigorate both Pakeha and Māori art.

Schoon believed Māori art was, and would continue to be, New Zealand's "most important cultural accomplishment."
(Damian Skinner)

Some say Schoon was an unruly artist and an even more unruly subject. His practice, like his life, was chaotic, uncontrolled, porous - driven by a strong set of philosophies; the role of art and the artist in the modern world, especially that yet to be forged in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Schoon's work is ideas-driven and process-based. He was never that interested in making or archiving finished works of art or building a coherent body of work. He made paintings, photographs, prints, pottery, carved jade and gourds, challenging established hierarchies between the various media, whether European or Māori. Exhibitions, with one exception, were largely treated as unnecessary distractions.

Schoon found more fulfillment in the working through of ideas and possibilities — in various ways, materials, and, notably, often with other artists. He regularly features in art history as a generative, guiding force in the work of others — notably as an early mentor figure to Gordon Walters – the two are often referred to in shorthand terms as the Picasso and Braque of New Zealand modernism.

Schoon rediscovered and to an extent rescued the craft of gourd growing and carving. He opened our eyes to the value of photography and design through his obsession with the raw materials proffered by the thermal landscapes around Rotorua.

The documentary underplays the theoretical in favour of a rich and impressionistic journey through New Zealand's most intriguing and impressive natural settings mixed with the effects they had on the interpretations wrought by our carvers, painters, writers, potters and designers.

The film introduces viewers to the incredible (re)discovery and recording of the lime rock shelters in the South Island and the debate surrounding the recording of the rock art treasures by Schoon in the early forties.

Signed, Theo Schoon emphasises the visual evidence of the extended journeys through the lime stone shelters and cave sites, the steam shrouded thermal landscapes of the North Island central plateau, the locations where pounamu/jade were sourced and the untidy and noisy timber yards he worked in; the urban and rural retreats he inhabited and where he cultivated and destroyed his friendships or grew his gourds.

Schoon studied Māori art and craft and attempted to highlight the achievements of a culture under siege at the time of his arrival here. His friendship with Pine Taiapa, Guide Rangi and many others attest to his total commitment in a contested and fraught cultural arena.

In addition to his almost incessant engagement with every artist, writer, musician, dancer, ceramicist, Māori carver, pounamu carver and designer, his writings and practical contributions should find a fertile response across the prospective film audiences. They will be treated to a rich kaleidoscope of archival footage, the quintessential landscapes he traversed and the rich basket full of visual imagery that represents his own work and that of the many artists and craftsmen he engaged with throughout New Zealand over five decades.

Schoon's is a big and enduring story.

Format:

DCP basic specifications are:

- Confirmation of running time - 01:39:28:10
- Resolution - DCI Flat 1998x1080 (With pillar boxing)
- Frame rate - The DCP is INTEROP at 25fps
- Ratio - 16:9
- Sound format - 5.1 surround
- File size - approx 200GB
- KDM requirement/encrypted file - DCP will not be encrypted so does not require a KDM

Note that because the film is 25fps and 1920x1080 the DCP will be INTEROP and have pillar boxing down the sides.

Who is making this film

DIRECTOR/PRODUCER

LUIT and JAN BIERINGA make feature length documentaries around art, education, culture - this is our fifth. All of the films have screened in the international film festival, on television within NZ, AirNZ and also to international audiences. They continue to be constantly used and can be viewed here:

the heART of the matter

<https://www.nzonscreen.com/title/heart-of-the-matter-2016>

The Man in the Hat

<https://www.nzonscreen.com/title/the-man-in-the-hat-2009>

Te Hono ki Aotearoa

<https://www.nzonscreen.com/title/te-hono-ki-aotearoa-2012>

Ans Westra: Private Journeys/Public Signposts:

<https://www.nzonscreen.com/title/ans-westra-private-journeys-2006>



Director / Producer [Luit Bieringa](#)



Producer/Director Jan Bieringa

Photography:

Scott Mouatt a Dunedin based DOP shot the extensive footage in and around Timaru where many of the caves and overhangs which house the cave drawings.

Bruce Foster a Wellington based photographer and documentary maker worked on the thermal landscapes in Whakarewarewa including Hinemihi, the wonderful home of Guide Rangi.

Joseph Kelly a Wellington based photographer shot the studio and Te Papa archive material.

David Paul an Auckland based well known DOP shot the installation of *Split Level View Finder* at Te Uru Art Gallery

Editor:

Lala Rolls is both an editor and director. Her work is well known and her biography and links to her work can be found here <https://www.nzonscreen.com/profile/lala-rolls> Lala was intrigued to work on this project as her mother had similar origins to Schoon. Lala is very strong on the blending of cultures and remarkably adept with archive footage.

Music:

Gareth Farr needs little introduction as a New Zealand composer and percussionist. Farr and Schoon have much in common essentially their love of Indonesian gamelan. "I would so much love this to work out, as when you look at Schoon and my large list of shared interests it seems insane that anyone else would do it." Blending the Dutch, Indonesian, Māori and Pakeha influences for the sound track required a special skill.

Sound Design:

Tom Scott-Toft:

Given the nature of the archival audio, the mute archival film footage and our poetic approach to the storytelling; the sound design/editing part of post-production work was complex and time consuming.

Colourist:

Gareth Evans experience working at Nga Taonga Sound and Vision gave him the best practice for working on this film - footage sourced from multiple places and some of limited quality made the task challenging indeed.

Clips and quotes

1. A poetic archive-rich documentary film on artist Theo Schoon. Though controversial Schoon was instrumental in shaping the art scene here in Aotearoa from his arrival in 1939 and throughout his unusual life and practice as an artist. Intended as a fully cinematic experience and subsequently for a secondary audience on the small screen.

2. The journey we will share with viewers traverses the rich tapestry our artistic landscape; literally given Schoon's immersion in Māori Rock Art and Rotorua's thermal landscapes and figuratively given his influence on almost every major New Zealand artist.

3. The film covers a number of themes:

- being an outsider in a straight society (Schoon was not only an outsider artist, he was also gay and out there)
- indigenous art and culture

- multiple art-world personalities, the rise of New Zealand modernism, an awakening and renaissance of Māori art
- a broader acceptance of strangers and the rearrangement of an essentially pre-war mono-cultural society that New Zealand was in the late 1930s.

4. Schoon engaged in many public discussions and was recorded mostly in audio but also on film. So this film is also a love letter to the archives through which we let Schoon tell his own story.

5. So in summary this young man arrived in Aotearoa in '39 and really made his mark which is now being re-examined and brought to life after a rather sad demise with his death in 1985. He was both admired and ignored; often felt unloved; he could be charming yet also cantankerous, often burning bridges that were later rebuilt.

Despite falling out of love with New Zealand for over a decade he returned during the last few years of his life before returning to Australia at the very end.

6. His recognition here is unrequited. However his resurrection in 2018 with a major and important biography and subsequent laudatory retrospective shifts the story.

Publicity images for media use can be found here:

http://www.bwx.co.nz/schoon-images/Theo_Schoon_Media_Images.html

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Theo Schoon
Done up in Pins and Curlers c.1965
Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki