

AS NEW ZEALAND MUSIC WITH A STRONG PACIFIC ACCENT REVERBERATES AROUND THE WORLD, ECLECTIC FASHION LABELS FROM AOTEAROA ENTER THE WARDROBES OF SUPERSTARS AND HIGH PROFILE FILMS PUT OUR SMALL COUNTRY ON THE MAP. CREATIVITY AND DIVERSITY ARE DEFINING OUR EMERGING AOTEAROA/NEW ZEALAND IDENTITY.

NEW ZEALAND IS A NATION OF MIGRANTS, HISTORICALLY AND IN THE PRESENT, AND A NATION OF TRAVELLERS BY GEOGRAPHIC ACCIDENT. THE WAYS THAT THIS SHAPES OUR CULTURAL IDENTITY ARE ARGUABLY AT THE CORE OF WHAT MAKES NEW ZEALAND UNIQUE. ENTERING A NEW ENVIRONMENT CHANGES ONE'S VIEW OF BOTH PAST AND PRESENT. THROUGH ART, THE EXPERIENCE OF DIFFERENCE AND DISLOCATION CAN BE GIVEN EXPRESSION. IN THE PROCESS, ACCEPTED VIEWS OF REALITY ARE CHALLENGED, AND IDENTITY AND MEMORY RECONSTRUCTED AND RENEWED.

ARTISTS ARE AT SOME LEVEL ALWAYS OUTSIDERS — CHOOSING ART AS AN OCCUPATION OFTEN MEANS CHOOSING TO LIVE ON THE FRINGES OF MAINSTREAM SOCIETY. YET ART, TO BE MEANINGFUL BEYOND THE ARTIST, MUST ENGAGE WITH EXPERIENCED CULTURAL, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL REALITIES. MIGRANT OR REFUGEE ARTISTS, MOVING BETWEEN THESE REALITIES, ARE IN A SENSE OUTSIDERS TWICE OVER. HOW DO THEY DEAL WITH THE CHALLENGES THIS INVOLVES, AND HOW DOES IT AFFECT THEIR WORK?

# looking in

## MIGRANT ARTISTS IN AOTEAROA

TEXT BY AMANDA SCOTHERN, PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID READ AND STEPHEN TILLEY



**SÁNDOR LAU**  
**CHINESE/HUNGARIAN AMERICAN**  
**WRITER/FILM MAKER**

Sándor Lau, a Chinese/Hungarian American, grew up in small-town Colorado and has found in Auckland, New Zealand a place to settle, at least for a while, after years of wandering. Already recognised as a writer, he has recently been making waves with short experimental and documentary films. He walked from Auckland to Cape Reinga to make his most recent documentary *Behaviours of the Backpacker*.

I grew up on 37 acres in Colorado, and spent all the time I could building wooden forts, catching snakes, climbing trees, hiking, and scouring the land for arrowheads. When we moved there in the late '70s cowboys would still bring their six-shooters to the Wagon Wheel Saloon. I can't say I advise shy, studious, creative Chinese boys to grow up in small town Reagan's America, but of course now, I'm terribly nostalgic.

My father's family came to Hawaii from Guangdong in the 1880s and my mother's family arrived on the East Coast from Hungary in 1913. We still have this very immigrant mentality — the need to work until our fingers bleed. So while I've always thought of myself as an artist, the choice to commit myself has been much more difficult because it feels like an indulgence or a hobby, like I'm neglecting my duty to suffer. But nearly any other path would plunge me into a lifetime of bitterness and regret, so it was not much of a choice at all.

Since leaving home I have lived in Oklahoma, Spain, France, Taiwan and New Hampshire. Having always felt a foreigner at home, the impulse to go abroad was very natural. I got a Fulbright Grant to come to Aotearoa in 2000, at a time when I needed some settling — not having lived in the same place for more than a year since I was 19. I really decided to stay when I got a scholarship to go to film school here in 2001, something I'd dreamed of but never would have had the money to do at home. And going to film school outside the American system was a particularly attractive option.

I grew up feeling a foreigner in my own country, so to come here as a foreigner is somehow more comfortable because I expect it. Within a few months of coming here, I cycled from Kaitaia to Wellington and Greymouth to Christchurch, which puts you on fairly intimate terms with the land. For my film, *Behaviours of the Backpacker*, I walked from Auckland to Cape Reinga. I think all people in some way feel themselves outsiders, and my film is really an anthem for exiles, outcasts and rejects like me.

I actually find it a tremendous advantage to be from outside of New Zealand, coming to this place and seeing it in a fresh way. I feel this desperate need to take advantage of everything here, as well as a responsibility towards it. Since it was a deliberate choice to come here, I have made a deliberate choice to get to know this land. I spent my time in Oklahoma pouting because I was in this godforsaken place populated by Christian fundamentalists and never bothered to learn anything about the largest Native American population in the country. Here, I've learned to weave flax, to speak a bit of Maori. About a quarter of my subjects in *Behaviours of the Backpacker* are Maori.

Also, in the film I visit Ngawha, in Northland, where against overwhelming community opposition, the government is building a prison on sacred land, in a mercury field, in a geothermal area. And, with half of the prison population being Maori, they're building it on Ngapuhi land, to imprison Ngapuhi. You steal a Toyota, you go to prison. You steal an entire country, you go to Parliament. I can't think of a worse form of exile than exile in your own ancestral land.

There is a Maori vision of the world that I learned on the long walk that I think applies to all human beings, but to migrants in particular: you spend your life walking backwards because you only see what's behind you, not what's in front. As I grow as an artist I find my work not becoming more complicated, but more elemental and I'm finding the further I walk away from home, the closer I get to it.

Sándor's short films can be viewed on [www.lessfilm.com](http://www.lessfilm.com) and he can be contacted on: [sandor\\_lau@yahoo.com](mailto:sandor_lau@yahoo.com)



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