



One significant piece of Modernist artwork present in this exhibition is **Rutu** (1951) by Rita Angus. It is a self-portrait, but for one significant difference; her ethnicity. Angus, a European woman, has here portrayed herself as a Polynesian woman artist amidst paradise. While this may outwardly appear to be a drastic and curious change (given the typical nature of a self-portrait being accurate to the artist's features), some would suggest that it is more of a manifestation of Rita Angus' perception of her spiritual self, indifferent to skin tone or ethnicity. One such proponent of this idea is Anne Kirker, author of 'New Zealand Women Artists: A Survey of 150 years' (1986) who

sees this painting as a spiritual realisation of the artist. The 'meditative goddess' depicted in the painting is a far cry from Angus' true self, having only just found her way out of a 'physical and mental breakdown'. And yet represents Angus' beliefs effectively and beautifully. The author of the text also claims that 'the figure of **Rutu** is reminiscent of the Virgin', referring to the mother of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary. **This is just one of the many allusions to the Christian faith that Kirker makes in the text, despite there not being a prominent display of indisputable Christian imagery within the art work.** While some suggest that the subject of the painting has her head silhouetted by a golden halo, this object could just as easily be interpreted as a glowing sun. The fact that there can be any dispute as to the religious intentions of the work means that it can be interpreted in any number of ways, above and beyond Christian ideas.

A response that presents a non-Christian analysis of the work can be found between the covers of 'Rita Angus: Life and Vision' (2008) by William McAloon and Jill Trevelyan. Instead of determining that Rita Angus' beliefs while working on **Rutu** were religious, these authors chose to reference Angus' belief that **Rutu** and its sister painting, **Sun Goddess** (1948) were not intended as artistic realisations of Angus herself, but were her fictitious daughters. This suggestion has been supported by quotes from a letter of Angus to another artist, Douglas Lilburn, where she states "about three hours later a child about 16 or 17 years of age, like my family, but not mine; she belongs to you" when writing of **Rutu**. **The inclusion of this text within a catalogue for Te Papa's own Rita Angus exhibition shows that it was accepted as both factual and relevant to the artwork's inception, whereas Kirker's text, part of a coffee table book comprising a variety of artists is less likely to appear in conjunction with the real work.** This means that it can be more speculative than a book produced by a museum which has a reputation as a purveyor of reliable knowledge, and thus must thus make conservative and well-researched speculations (or none at all), a published book is less bound to straight facts and objectivity. Should a single author be called out for misguided speculation as to the meaning behind artworks, they only have their own reputation on the line. **An institution such as Te Papa, however, would be devastated by reports of bias or skewed perception of an artwork. This would explain the collaboration of two authors for the latter text, as one would help to quell any likelihood of personal bias or influence being worked into a theoretically objective text like a museum catalogue.**