



Christine Hellyar, *Necklace Goblet*, 2001, bronze. Photos: Gil Hanly and Sally Tagg

To the island

Connells Bay Sculpture Park features outstanding works, which respond to the restorative approach to the land at the heart of this inspired project. Robin Woodward reports.

Connells Bay Sculpture Park, at the south-eastern end of Waikeke Island, is one of Auckland's best kept secrets. The approach, 40 minutes' drive along a narrow unsealed road, gives no hint of the destination, a superb showcase for New Zealand sculpture. Over the past ten years more than 25 large-scale works have been installed in the spectacular coastal landscape at Connells Bay. When John and Jo Gow initiated the project in 1998 one of their aims was to present major works by leading sculptors in an ecologically sustainable environment. They're genuinely delighted to be able to share their passion for the arts, the outdoor environment and this place, Connells Bay.

Being hosted by John and Jo epitomises New Zealand hospitality; they make everyone feel welcome. Every visitor is given a guided tour of the park and the Gow's stories are wonderfully informative and entertaining. For two hours I enjoyed a mix of history and anecdote, each new turn in the trail revealing another sculpture in its own 'planted room'. Afterwards, I sat on the deck with the Gows, sharing their vision, listening to stories of the

installation of works, hearing tales of Billy Connelly's tour of the park – and of the yachties who pulled into the bay to check out the giant 'triffid' (actually a sculpture) they had seen from the sea.

What distinguishes the Connells Bay project is the vision John and Jo Gow bring to the concept. They've taken their inspiration from Storm King and Goodwood, two internationally recognised leaders in the commissioning and display of large-scale three-dimensional art. Connells Bay provides a cameo of current international trends in public art. The works reflect a wide range of categories – geographical, environmental, human habitation, conservation and recreation. When the temporary installation series is taken into account, Connells Bay also embraces the more recent 'new genre public art', a term categorising art that carries a social agenda and involves an interaction between the artist and the 'community' the work belongs to. For instance, Nic Moon's 2007 temporary installation *Out of the Ashes*, a series of woven shelters protecting planted seedlings, was an environmental work designed to help the land

Right (from top): Kon Dimopoulos, *Kete*, 2004, polyurethane resin rods; Chris Booth, *Slip*, 2003/04, basalt, greywacke, stainless steel; Neil Dawson, *Other People's Houses*, 2002, painted steel; Jeff Thomson, *Three Cows Looking Out to Sea*, 2001 (detail), corrugated iron

regenerate and restore it to its pre-colonial state. Most work at Connells Bay makes a strong reference to place. This could be place as in Aotearoa/New Zealand, or the seaside location of Connells Bay, or simply Connells Bay, the place. Graham Bennett takes New Zealand's geographical place on the planet as the point of origin for his eight-metre-high *Reasons to Return*, three open mesh, rotating radar dishes that weave patterns in the wind. The proportions of the 'wands' are similar to segments of the globe with its latitudinal and longitudinal references. With a more local emphasis, Christine Hellyar's *Necklace Goblet*, placed high on a spur overlooking the waters of the gulf, is a frame on the land. The body of the vessel is shaped space, offering a framed view of the land and seascape. The patination on the bronze responds to the colour of the sea and the sky; it suggests a vessel dredged up from the ocean's depths, rich with encrustations.

There's a similar interplay with nature in Kon Dimopoulos' *Kete*. It was the whispering of the wind through the grasses and the rustling of the trees at Connells Bay that provided the initial inspiration for this wind-driven, kinetic, acoustic work. The colours of the resin rods in this woven kete, or treasure basket, reference the red of the surrounding pohutukawa trees and the rods are clearly audible as they clip each other in passing. Even more place-specific is Phil Price's bright yellow *Dancer*. Here the artist has personalised his trademark kinetic concept to the Connells Bay environment. *Dancer* stands amidst a field of daffodils; its leisurely movement recalls the days of old when people walked down through the daffodils to collect billies of milk from the cowshed.

Works such as *Dancer* play on the romanticism of days gone by. Others, such as Neil Dawson's *Other People's Houses*, are more challenging for the viewer. At first sight Dawson's seeming jumble of architectural frames, piled atop each other at rakish angles, can be rather jarring in this tranquil environment. This is exactly the point the artist is making. What right does humankind have to interrupt and disturb the natural landscape? And don't we always absolve ourselves of our responsibility – isn't it always 'other people's houses' that are the problem?

Artist Peter Nicholls is at once more documentary and more abstract in his reference to human engagement with the land. Since European settlement of the area in the mid-19th century there have been four owners of Connells Bay, guardians of the land, prior to the Gows. In *Tomo* Nicholls commemorates each of them – the McDonalds, the Hewins, the Connells and the Fowlers.





Their family names are carved into the ribbon of wood, the bright red river of life that flows among the trees, leaving its mark on the land.

In the early 20th century this steeply sloping valley was stripped of its indigenous forest cover and turned into farmland. Not unnaturally, erosion followed. Chris Booth offers palliative care in the form of *Slip*, an intricate, highly engineered and sculptural earth blanket of basalt and greywacke. Referencing the forms created by land slips, the gouging of the land and the delta-like fans of eroded soil, it forms a virtual blanket on the land – a blanket designed to cover, protect and nurture.

As John and Jo Gow return the overgrown farmland to a planted landscape, Regan Gentry tracks this next stage of human habitation. Constructed from fencing wire and staples, *Skeleton Trees* are the ghosts of Connells Bay trees – past and future. The metamorphosis of Gentry's material, from farm fence to organic tree, parallels the evolution of human use of, and interaction with, the land. With their semi-mechanical appearance and their industrial materials, *Skeleton Trees* raises questions about what is natural in this mediated landscape.

One work that has a particularly close relationship to the land is Virginia King's *Oioi Bridge*, a work designed to engage visitors visually, physically and acoustically. It's a site-specific, functional bridge which, on a practical level, provides a solution to the basic need to cross the wetlands into the paddocks of the sculpture park. King has taken the local oioi grass as the inspiration for the aluminium rods of her bridge, which have been rolled



Top: Regan Gentry, *Skeleton Trees*, 2006, No. 8 fencing wire, galvanised pipe, concrete
Above: Phil Price, *Dancer*, 2003, carbon fibre, stainless steel



Ann Noble, *Spool Henge*, South Pole, Antarctica, laser printed image on PVC, about to be installed on a 5 x 2.5m billboard at Connells Bay



Fatu Feu'u, *Guardian of the Planting*, 1999, carved macrocarpa stump

and sandblasted to suggest the appearance of the grass and the variegation of the foliage. Designed as a kinetic and percussive piece, this interactive art bridge springs to life as soon as one steps onto it. The ribs and planks are flexibly attached so they vibrate and clatter as visitors cross the bridge. Underneath there's a myriad of silver coins that dangle and rattle – bridging finance? Even more site specific is Fatu Feu'u's *Guardian of the Planting*, a work carved into the massive stump of a giant macrocarpa that is still rooted in the earth. In its double-headed form there's a bicultural reference to Maori myth and to the Roman god Janus.

The most recent work installed at Connells Bay, David McCracken's *The best laid plans go west*, marks a new departure. This work moves on from the idea of commissioning works that tell the story of the land, the place and its human habitation. *The best laid plans go west* is based on a poem by McCracken, which is essentially a musing on the nature of the accident, as opposed to the planned event. The poem is constructed of stock phrases and clichés that McCracken has likened to building blocks in a wall. He takes the analogy one step further in this 16-metre-long slab of text that emerges from the hillside in bricks of corten steel, each of which is 2.5 metres high.

Each year a temporary installation is commissioned for Connells Bay. The work is designed to last for the six-month summer season and is then removed without trace. The 2009/2010 temporary installation is a work by

Jeff Thomson. Given that Thomson is endlessly inventive with his signature material, corrugated iron, the open barn he has created might not surprise. But its contents do – a corrugated haystack with hay bales formed in the shapes of architectural features such as downpipes, weatherboards and ridge caps.

Also at Connells Bay this season is a temporary photographic installation work, an image laser printed onto PVC and installed on a 5 x 2.5 metre billboard in the landscape. The first work in the new annual Billboard Project, Anne Noble's photograph, *Spool Henge, South Pole, Antarctica*, was taken at the South Pole in December 2008. Showing empty cable spools in Antarctica, this work captures the space between imagination and reality. The empty cable spools are dumped at the perimeter of the South Pole Station and then stacked up and arranged to mimic Stonehenge – thus the name the site has acquired. This representation of human activity in the last great wilderness on earth, presents the unbounded impact of humans on the farthest reaches of the planet. Noble's photograph is an extension of the concern for the environment informing much of the work at Connells Bay Sculpture Park.

Visits to Connells Bay Sculpture Park are by prior appointment only. The Gow's guest cottage is also available for rent for those who want to spend more time in the park. Visit www.connellsbay.co.nz or phone 09 372 8957 for more information.