

**DAVID
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craig potton publishing

First published in 2013 by Craig Potton Publishing

Craig Potton Publishing
98 Vickerman Street, PO Box 555, Nelson, New Zealand
www.craigpotton.co.nz

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ISBN 978 1 877517 88 4

Printed in China by Midas Printing International Ltd

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3 NEW ZEALAND & VOLCANOES

Hawke's Bay on the east coast of New Zealand's North Island is where we finally settled. It is there that the first rays of the sun emerge from over the ocean to reach out and touch land, beginning a new day – and, while we were there, even a new millennium – for the whole planet. Our first year was spent in accommodation provided by the Hawke's Bay Polytechnic while I was artist-in-residence in the Visual Art Department. The course was run by Jacob Scott who had built a strong community of creative people around the campus. With *Hornpipe* safely moored in Ahuriri harbour, it was a carefree time – a pleasant lull in the struggle to establish a career in New Zealand which would soon get much harder. The residency came at an opportune time when I was searching for a creative identity and future direction. With income and home assured, I could afford to experiment freely.

At the time the 'art-craft debate' was a hotly argued topic in the craft world (though not in the art world!), and I became a keen contributor. My making has never been just a manual activity, and theoretical thinking has always been an important underpinning of my practice. I had been a part of the craft revival of the seventies, in which identity was found in physical skills and a mostly rural self-sufficient lifestyle, but it had largely run its course. A new generation of more urban-based craftspeople was emerging and seeking a new form of cultural identity and expression. Up until then, the polytechnic craft courses had provided skills training, focused around the various media such as clay, textiles or wood; now, a new call went up for a more inclusive craft design course that included history and theory. At the same time, some of the polytechnics were moving towards university status, offering degree courses which inevitably required a more intellectual and theoretical approach at the expense of skills training.



ART, CRAFT AND DESIGN

Art, craft and design are not things, they are processes; they are not nouns but verbs. Put simply, art is the idea, the mind shift, a conceptualising process; design is working out how it will look, and planning the form, proportions and layout – a rational process; craft is what you use to make it, the necessary manual skill to realise the idea – a physical process.

And here is the crux of my argument: every successful work produced by a creative person, now and in the past, uses all three processes to a varying degree – that is what makes the work successful. Of course the balance between the processes will vary a great deal. A work such as a turned wooden bowl might favour more heavily the craft process, but it still needs some artistic inspiration to stand out. Another work, such as a Jenny Holzer slogan, might be almost all art process, all concept, but it must have some physical form, as either a designed font or an assembled neon sign, if we are to see it.

This has been the case throughout history, and generally the balance between the three has been much more even. The blazing colours in the frescoes of Michelangelo have survived to this day because of his impeccable craftsmanship in preparing his grounds, mixing his pigments and probably even making his own brushes. His layouts are beautifully designed in their proportions and apposite relation to content. And the artistic ideas that he was expressing about humanity and about religion were radical statements that caused a subtle cultural shift in perceptions. Art is the power to change: it can change the way we think, not by argument, but by example; it can move us to tears or to anger. If we let it, it takes us to a deeper place than we would go in our normal daily routine – like religion, but without the dogma.

Later, tighter financial controls forced the closure of some of the polytechnics' workshops. It was more cost-efficient to fill a classroom with desks than with machinery and tools.

The art-craft debate had started as a way of breaking down the priority of art over craft in the traditional value hierarchy. It was an attempt to empower craft with critical discourse and to challenge the inferior manual status that western Modernist art theorists had imposed on it. In their opinion, art was the pursuit of lofty ideals, of a vision reaching over the horizon, while craft in comparison was fussy and myopic, focusing on close-up detail and technique, and hence intrinsically inferior. This characterisation of craft was, in part, correct, but there is nothing ignoble and inferior about the craftsperson's time-honoured skills, and my life had been given a great deal of meaning by them. As craft practitioners, I and others felt that our calling deserved the same theoretical writing and underpinning that art had. Initially, some of us undertook this work ourselves, writing articles in magazines and catalogues. But in time graduates trained in craft theory and history emerged and took over as curators and writers.

Ironically, what had begun with the aim of empowering craft ended up superseding it and turning it into something of a dirty word. The word craft was gradually replaced with 'object' or 'form'. Craftspeople were now object-makers. Craft courses became craft design and then visual arts courses. Furthermore, if craft was to have the same status as art, why have a separate Crafts Council? In most countries, such bodies were closed down or absorbed into an arts council. For a while, New Zealand had an interim body called AMBA, the Arts (note!) Marketing Board of Aotearoa, set up in response to a survey of craftspeople that indicated our biggest concern was how to sell the stuff we made. But it didn't last long, leading some to argue that it had been set up to fail by an Arts Council dominated by artists.

So what was all the fuss about? In my writings on the subject, I have always maintained that the arguments over 'what is art?' or 'what is craft?' are doomed to failure and confusion as long as we treat the words as nouns, as things. How can you consistently and plausibly categorise objects,

or even people, in this way? In Hawke's Bay we used to have separate annual Art and Craft Reviews which became a nonsense when people who were rejected by one Review entered their work in the other. Who was prepared to cast judgement, saying this work is art and this craft – or not? Naturally, there were some works that no one would argue over, but a great many could fall either way. This was because the young graduates emerging from the new craft – that is, visual arts – courses had been educated to underpin craft practice with theories and concepts. 'Craft' was now being taught in a social context as an arena for more overt exploration of such things as cultural or gender identities. In the course of these arguments and debates I came to develop my view of the creative process.

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Art, craft and design are all inseparable and equally important elements of the one creative process. They blend seamlessly into a continuum. As in the spectrum, there are clearly different colours, but it is impossible to insert a dividing line between them so that there is a distinct colour on either side. The process flows from art, through design, into craft.

Where do designers get the forms and vocabulary with which to work? Good designers generate their own through the art process to produce original work. But if someone considers themselves to be purely a designer and begins their creative process partway along the spectrum, their work will only ever be derivative. With nothing original of their own, what else can they do but reshuffle existing forms and vocabulary? So much of what I see today in the design world does this. It is shallow and derivative work. Like Postmodernism, it aims for effect, to grab attention with wit or irony. But you can laugh at a joke only once; after that it becomes stale. If, however, you first work through your own art process, you are able to generate your own personal vocabulary, your own personal forms. With these you can create your own designs which by *default* will have originality and integrity. It is a natural outcome that flows from the process, not a self-conscious contrivance. It will inevitably speak of this time, this place, this person.

Māori have a concept called *tūrangawaewae*, which can be interpreted as a place to stand. On the one hand, it is literally a location, your ancestral home where you are empowered by the spirit of your ancestors who live there around you still. On the other hand, it is more generally a spiritual core, a place of knowing and a pillar of strength. A creator has to find this place and learn to work from it.

I am acutely aware, while writing this book, of the common ground among all creative processes. As I write I have to design ahead, planning the layout of the chapter, placing the different arguments and descriptive passages in an order that makes sense while also igniting a spark. Unlike furniture, this has no three-dimensional form, only linearity. And as I assemble the words, I feel as if I am crafting them, chiselling them and polishing them, fitting them together like the rocks in a dry-stone wall to create a tight, neatly interlocking block. I first had a similar revelation while reading Dostoevsky many years ago, one fledgling craftsman recognising a master.

Looking at my own work at this time, I realised I had initially mastered the craft process. Then, while developing the Pacific series, I had taught myself more about design. But I knew very little about the art process. How do I generate my own ideas, rather than derive them from others, such as Polynesian sailors? What are my ideas? Where is my *tūrangawaewae*?

I started my year as artist-in-residence with the aim of answering these questions. I needed to do this to find my promethean spark and to achieve a degree of self-mastery, as I now see it under the Fire phase. I did not know where it would lead or even really where to start. For a whole year I made no furniture. I was given a studio space at Oatara – an old set of stables adjacent to the campus and used as an extension of the art department – and started by investigating the use of colour in my work. I had recently had a dream in which I saw blobs of colour, like the daubs from an Impressionist's brush, on a sheet of glass, and I tried to recreate something of what I had seen. The reality never matches the vision, but it led me into making a series of murals made up of many small coloured shapes. I spent hours painstakingly shaping pieces of MDF wood, priming them with gesso and building up layers of thin glazed colours. I used all the acrylic paints thinned but unmixed, achieving the gradations of colour by overlaying different colours, and then stuck the pieces onto the wall with Blu-tack.

I went searching for colours. It was now autumn and Hawke's Bay, unlike Northland, has many exotic deciduous trees, particularly in its orchards. Here I found a rich palette. Placing the coloured pieces on the wall inspired me to learn more about patterns. Looking down in scale, I found them in biology textbooks, in such things as cell and protein structures. Looking up, I was again drawn to the landscape. For the first time I really started to take notice of the landscape in more than a picturesque way, and so started to think of it as just 'the land'.

There was much to learn as I ventured out from my Oatara studio. There are no mountains in Northland, and I hadn't really had an opportunity to go tramping since I'd left Britain. Now we started exploring the nearby ranges, the Ruahines, the Kawekas and the Raukumaras, all within an hour or two's drive,

The Wall 1993
Split willow. 1.8 metres long.



and with numerous tracks and huts scattered throughout. The Kawekas are higher than any mountain range in Britain, with great ridge walks and deep river gorges, even some hot springs to soak in after a long hike. Much of the area is covered in the original beech forest, ranging from the giant lower red beech to higher alpine beech, though the under-canopies have been dramatically reduced by introduced grazers like deer and possums.

I walked out to Cape Kidnappers along the uplifted strata of the exposed cliff faces, the older and older sediments of which gradually take you back through time. There you can see layers of shingle deposited at what were once river mouths, and beds of lighter silt that had been carried further offshore. In some places there are wholly preserved shells and in others semi-petrified branches, blackened in the mud. A vertical faultline shift in the strata tells of a violent earthquake. The same features, created at a time when the land was still under the sea, can be found many kilometres inland, in the sides of ravines scoured out by rivers

As a sailor I expected land to be solid and immovable – we needed its eternal surety after days of being thrown around by the swell. But here land too rolled in visible waves when shaken by the unimaginable power of an earthquake, such as the one that flattened Napier in 1931. This led me to think about land not just for its beguiling surface, but as an underlying structure; not just as it appears now, but with a history, a story to tell. What had happened below the surface to create these features? Because this land is so new it wears its skin thinly; on the steep hillsides, denuded of their original forests, there is nothing to hold what little soil exists. The structure of underlying rock is clear to see, protruding like the bones of a severely malnourished figure.

Closer to home, I took trips out to draw rock faces and to photograph their patterns. On some of these I was joined by Julia van Helden, who was also a resident artist for the same year. Julia is best known for her ceramic work. She has a deep natural affinity with the landscape, and her porcelain forms often look like aged limestone rock formations. Her pastel drawings from the landscape have a rhythmic pattern of marks that are not so much surface but seem to have come from her immersion within the land. Much of what I learnt that year about



Dance of Life 1991
Mural: MDF shapes, artists' acrylics, Blu-tack.
3 metres high.

PATTERN

A pattern is an accumulation of events that repeat themselves in outwardly visible ways. Initially the events appear random until there are sufficient repeats for the pattern to appear. I remember a decisive demonstration of this when I was at school. A counter, like the odometer on a car, recorded random events – there was no way to predict the next event, the next turn of the counter from 3 to 4. But when sped up, the turn of the 10s became less random, the 100s even less so, until at 100,000 you could predict exactly the next slow turn. So it all depends on scale. Often we are too close to something to see the pattern, but if we are able to get far enough away the pattern will become apparent.

Sometimes there are patterns within patterns. What looks at first to be a quite obvious repeat becomes more complex with time or scale as larger repeats start to appear. Fractals are patterns that reappear and repeat on endlessly increasing scales.

In art, pattern has been trivialised into superficial decoration – the pleasing arrangement and repeats of shapes and lines – an end in itself. But in nature pattern is often a consequence, the visible manifestation of inner structure. It is the foundation of growth and life.

art – of ways of seeing and connecting what I felt to marks on paper – is thanks to Julia.

One day we went up north of Napier to the Devil's Elbow where a fire had destroyed a pine forest. The charred trunks had been cut and allowed to lie where they fell across the steep hillside. It was a powerful, graphic sight. The black, rigid lines of the trees settled over the folds of land, articulating the curves with their brief stiffness like repeating marks of a crayon. They collected in gullies in dense, tangled confusion. Close up their surfaces were crazed into regular rectangles of glistening charcoal. I tried to draw them and couldn't, but the memory remained vividly etched.

Gradually I was finding a place, attempting to express something of what I was experiencing in this new landscape in a series of murals. The coloured shapes were replaced by split pieces of timber. I was returning to the material I knew, but in a very different way. The split wood had a natural spontaneity that followed the grain of the tree, rather than the arbitrary drive of the saw. The way its surface resembled stone encouraged me to build 'stone walls' out of wood, just as I had learnt to do in Northumberland with real rocks. Sometimes I painted the wood black with bitumen, and this had the effect of homogenising the mural, taking it one step away from the original material while also referring to what I had seen at the Devil's Elbow. I sought out curved branches which I could split into raw, gnarly and expressive shapes, and then used these to build up images of the landscape's formation and erosion.

Along with developing my own work like this, I taught some practical design and making classes in the Visual Art Department. When I discovered, with some surprise, that there was no art history class at the polytechnic, I volunteered to run one. It turned out to be a much larger task than I had anticipated, even though I covered only the last 150 years. I had to learn all the material in advance and resource all the images I needed. It was a great learning experience in terms of both course content and my ability to stand in front of a class and remember all my notes.

In the process I was excited to discover other sculptors working with nature, and particularly with wood. Andy Goldsworthy, and David Nash, with his wooden boulders, I already knew; but then there were the Italians Giuseppe Penone of Arte Povera, and Giuliano Mauri who used twigs and branches to make graphic murals like birds' wings and cages. The Romanian Napoleon Tiron built shambling great figures out of short, split pieces of wood that filled the figure like three-dimensional scribbles; English sculptor Richard Long drew with mud on walls and created sculptures by walking them across the landscape; Tony Cragg made colourful murals out of sorted plastic rubbish. In learning about the history of sculpture I suddenly recognised similar patterns of creative evolution to those I was going through, and this gave me greater insight into my own work.

Closer to home, I learned more about our own sculptors as well, in particular Chris Booth for whom I have a great deal of respect as an interpreter of the

ANTHONY CARO

Anthony Caro is an English sculptor who pioneered important new artistic territory. He made sculpture totally autonomous where it was no longer connected in any way to the figure, to landscape, to a narrative, even to a plinth. Instead, he required the observer to consider the work from a distance, pondering solely the aesthetic composition of form. Caro's early steel sculptures were painted one colour to homogenise them and deny even a sense of material. He was a master of spatial composition, balancing line and surface, curve and straight, positive and negative. In that respect, his process was similar to mine, and there was much I could learn from him. The set of compositional tools he assembled as an artist were mine to use as an applied artist. The design of my Sail chair ultimately involved the same process of composing straight and curve, positive and negative, except that I had also to work within functional limitations.

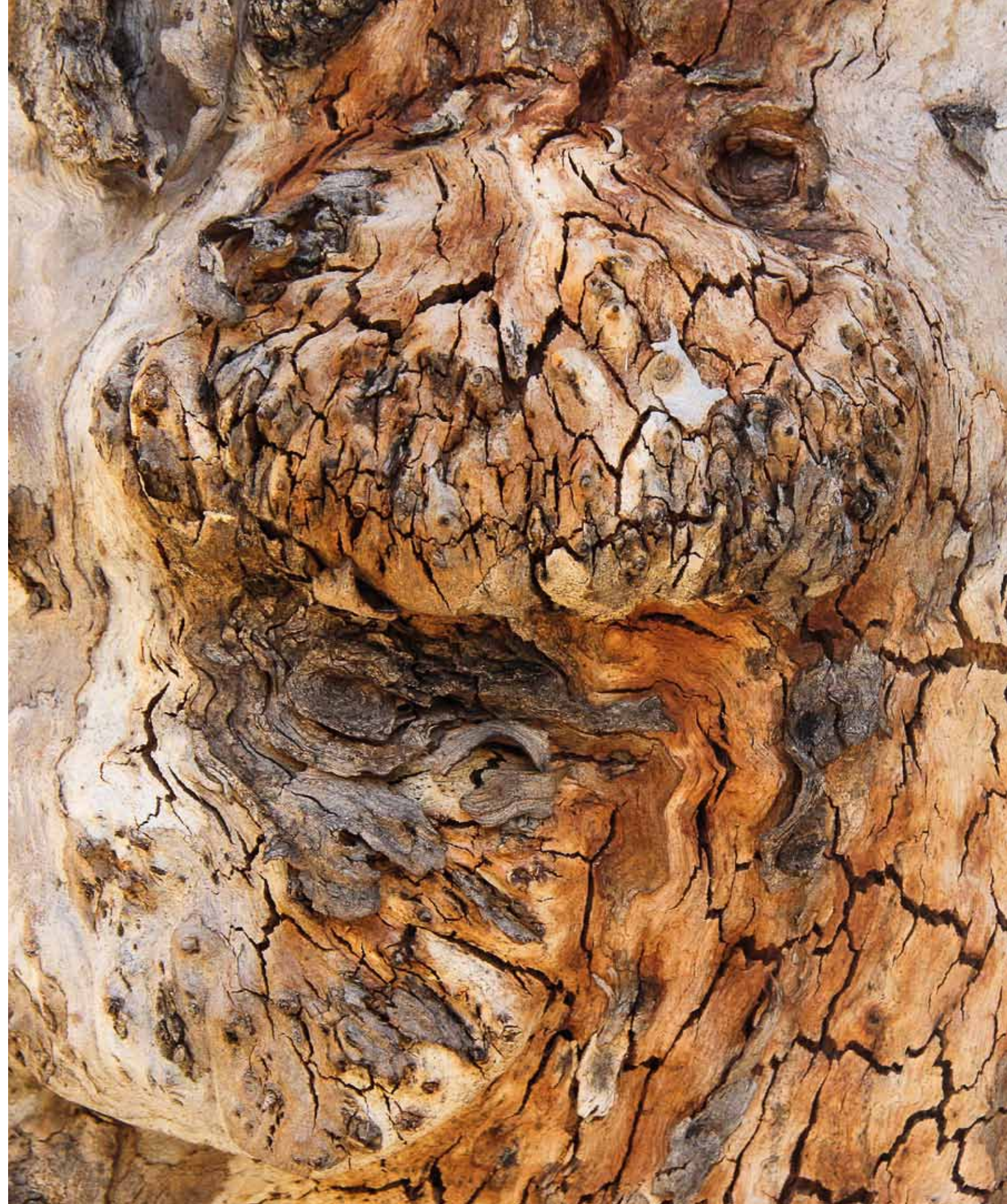
Many other artists have worked in a similar way since, making large metal sculptural compositions. Some of these works reveal unexplored nuances, but most of them are derivative, and have little new to say, being closer to the reproductive design and craft processes than to the imaginative artistic one.

RICHARD DEACON

Where could sculpture go after it had been so reduced? One of Caro's pupils at St Martin's School of Art was Richard Deacon. Deacon's response to the question was to reconnect, to re-open communication with the viewer. Rather than shut the viewer out behind a layer of paint, he said, 'Look this is how I made it! Here are the rivets, here are the drips and runs of the glue I used, here is wood, here is metal – come in, come and have a look.' He saw sculpture as being like poetry: in the same way that the poet uses everyday words to much more powerful effect, so the sculptor builds with everyday materials, creating poetry of form. To make the connection and to draw on the narrative, he gave his works poetic titles. What excited me most about this was the realisation that, unawares, I had, in a small way, done exactly the same thing with my string-lashed, roughly finished Pacific series of chairs.



Ridgewalk 1991
Mural: Split totara, acrylic paint wash.
2 metres long.



LIFE DRAWING

Life drawing is an invaluable practice for any creative person – I have even heard of architects who do classes regularly. There is no substitute for hand drawing, especially in this computer age. I have found that I simply can't create the same curves with computed geometry as I can with a gestural flourish, so instead I will scan the hand sketch and draw over it in the computer. But an accomplished 'flourish' does not come easily; it requires constant practice to keep your hand in, like training your body at the gym. This is what life drawing does. It develops hand-eye coordination in a very intense way. At the end of a two-hour session, the work of moving all that information, like data transfer, from your eyes to your brain to your fingers leaves you exhausted.

The other unique aspect of life drawing is its bodily connection. Drawing a tree or a rock, you must rely only on observation. Looking at another human body, you can actually put yourself in that position; you can *feel* what it is like within your own body and draw from that visceral connection. How is the weight carried to the ground? Where are the lines of force? Drawing with the same muscles, the same movement, you are recreating the pose from an inner empathy that you cannot have with any other subject, emphasising those stress lines, sensing the structure.

Drawing *is* physical, it is the result of bodily actions, and we can learn most about drawing when the subject is another physical body.

land. Chris came and taught a workshop at Otatara. He is best known for his large stone sculptures, but earlier in his career he had developed a method of freely pouring molten bronze in the open air in a much more expressive way than its conventional usage in castings. He took us into the bush with a portable foundry, and helped us make personal responses to it with the bronze. My piece still hangs by our front door. Chris was an important mentor to me at this time, encouraging my tentative forays into what was unfamiliar and difficult artistic territory.

Julia was running life drawing classes, which I always attended. This was not a new practice for me – Linda and I had both done life drawing in England, as well as a little bit between ourselves while we were sailing. But Julia brought a new, fresh perspective – a more delicate female approach than my more direct male one. Since then Linda has continued to run life classes through the adult education programme, and I have gone to these whenever possible.

Near the end of my year at the polytechnic, I suggested to Jacob the idea of a sculpture symposium, which he supported enthusiastically. Behind Otatara, as part of the campus, was a small plantation of young pine trees which was about due for thinning. I wanted to use this as our sole source of material, so that all the artists brought nothing with them and started with the same resource. One of the interests for viewers would be in seeing the variety of directions taken by the artists. Would they work with the timber, branches, bark or needles? It would also be a showcase for creating art work using simple, easily replaced material and minimal machinery. All work would be made and exhibited on site in the plantation. A year later, we assembled a group of some of the best sculptors of the time, both Māori and Pākehā – but at the last

minute the polytechnic decided they didn't want their trees thinned. We had to hastily organise an alternative from a local logging company who generously donated a truckload of 'thinings' which turned out to be pretty large trees. These created rather more of a physical challenge and meant that we weren't able to work in the plantation. The larger blocks of wood allowed the sculptors to fall back into more conventional carving and construction work, and chainsaws screamed. It was still a successful event, but sadly it has not been repeated.

My year at Otatara had been an exciting time of learning much and getting to know a new community of wonderful people, particularly Jacob and Julia, to whom I owe a great deal. At the end, I put on an exhibition at the then Hawke's Bay Museum in Napier of the landscape-inspired, coloured and bitumen-painted murals I had been working on. Linda, who had also been given some studio space at Otatara, had an exhibition of her figurative work at a private gallery in the city. We had assumed that once our year in Hawke's Bay was over, we would be taking off again on *Hornpipe*, but when it became clear that it was time for the

boys' education to take precedence, it was back to reality with a hard jolt, just as it was when we first arrived in New Zealand.

When you have lived, worked and played in some of the most beautiful places in the world, it is very hard to choose one place in which to live. You want the best of all that you have had, because anything else seems an unbearable anti-climax. But such dream places do not exist, so either you wander on,



Charcoal life drawing sketches in the Havelock North studio.

searching for ever, or you lower your standards and compromise. And that is what we knew we had to do. During the year I was artist-in-residence, we had come to know and like Napier and the surrounding district. There was a strong and supportive artistic community centred around the polytechnic Art Department, and the region was large enough to supply all the services we needed, but with none of the drawbacks of a rambling, suffocating city like Auckland. And, as if to seal the deal, Linda was offered a part-time job teaching art at a private school.

Letting go of *Hornpipe* was one of the hardest things I have had to do, but in the end it was also a relief. The demanding work of maintenance was getting me down, and the continued safety of the ageing steel hull was becoming a worry. Just as significantly, Linda and I had largely sacrificed our creativity in return for a rewarding lifestyle. If losing the boat and the life she represented was a wrench, we saw the payoff in increased creative opportunities ashore, including the chance to have our own studio spaces.

The effects of the 1987 stock market crash lingered in New Zealand longer than in most countries, and were still depressing prices into the nineties. This proved to be a double whammy for us: it took much longer than we'd hoped to

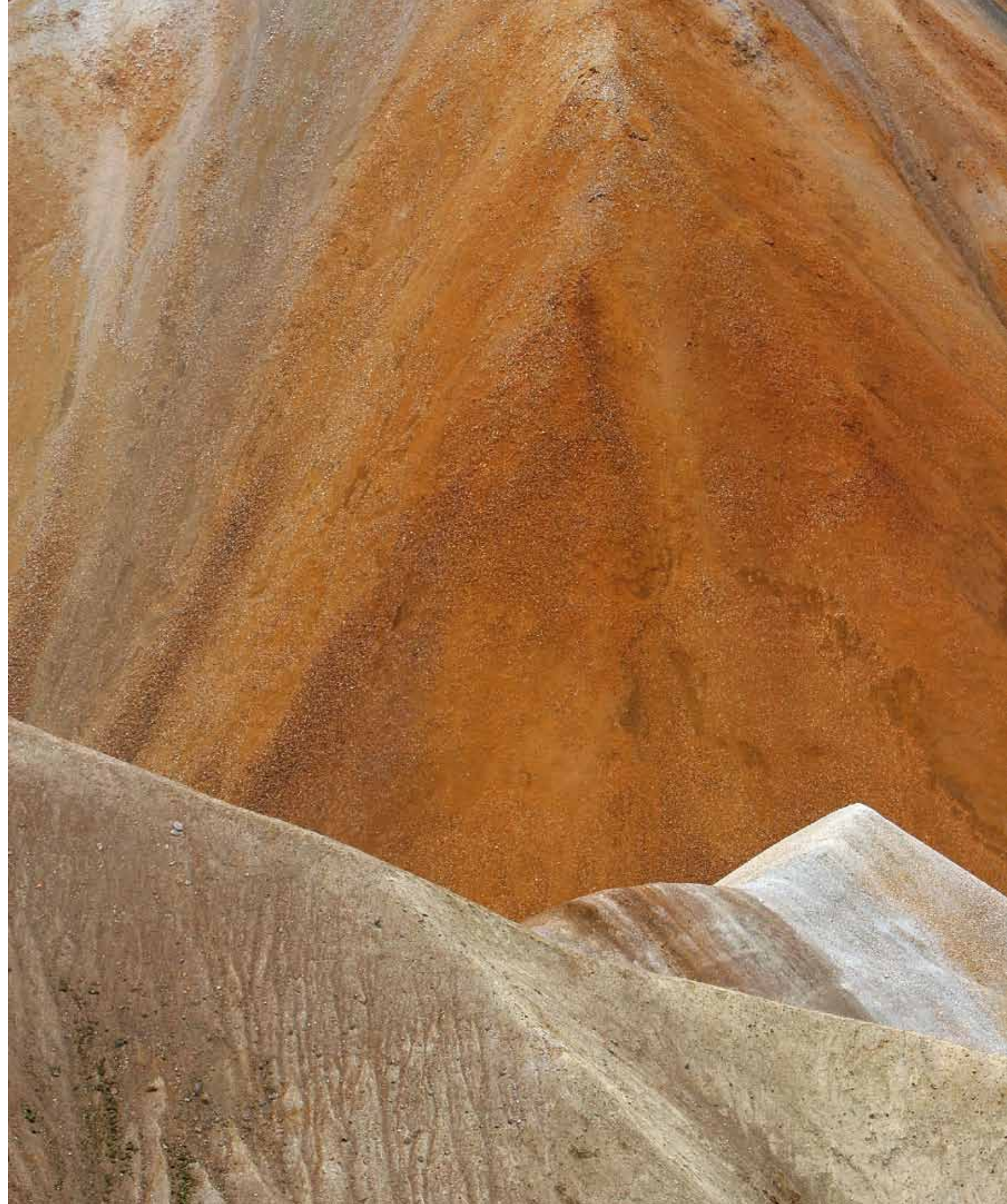
Napier City Gallery 1992
LEFT Kaweka Upthrust 1991
Split fruit wood, bitumen.
RIGHT River Rocks 1991
Split pine, bitumen, acrylic paint.
FRONT Canoe Chair 1989
Matai, Indonesian rosewood, jute
string lashings.



sell *Hornpipe* for a disappointingly low price, and work was hard for me to find, especially because I was largely an unknown in Hawke's Bay. At first I did not even have a workshop and had to make furniture in a tiny open garage next to our tiny rented house. Once again I am eternally grateful to a few generous clients who supported me with commissions when I didn't appear to have a lot to offer.

It seems to be true that problems attract problems. Or maybe when you are down and finding life hard, minor setbacks you would normally shrug off rack up, like viruses drawn to a weakened body. After the healthy outdoor life we had lived on the boat, I found it incredibly difficult to adapt to our new committed life in a suburban box, and particularly missed not being able to see the horizon, the full circle of sky, the coming weather. I felt disconnected and disoriented, and ended up with health problems. On top of this, we had two major bereavements in the family back in Britain. It was especially hard on the boys, starting at new

Sketch for Kaweka Upthrust 1991
Pastels on paper.



schools and in their teenage years. It was probably only because of the strength of the family bond, built up over the previous years, that we were able to survive this time together.

Looking back now, I can see this very testing time as the true Fire experience, though I wasn't aware of it as that then. The key aspect of the Fire element is the balance between ego and humility, between too much self-confidence and too little. If you have too much self-confidence, everything seems easy, and you fail to understand the real value of things because you haven't had to work for them. Ultimately this leads to arrogance. If, however, you have too little confidence, you will never take the plunge to go out and take on new



Trubridge House 1992
Havelock North.

experiences. There are times when you need humility and times when you need confidence, and it is important to be able to have both. Right now, I needed the humility to take on work I might not want to do in order to support my family. But I also needed the confidence to be able to adapt to whatever new kind of work was necessary.

I have always been open to learning something new, seeing it both as a challenge and as an opportunity to increase knowledge and experience, even if it is not always the easy road. Recently I watched a video of William talking about his first world freediving record. Before undertaking it, he had imagined it being rather easier than it turned out to be. Later, he was able to talk with impressive humility about the two public failures that gave him a much greater respect for just what an achievement it was when he finally did get it.

We searched for a house to buy with the *Hornpipe* money, but just couldn't bring ourselves to live in any of the places on offer – at least I couldn't. Linda would have probably settled for anything by then! So we bought some land and, over the course of the next year, built a house of my own design. Demanding as it was, it was the best thing we could have done. The all-

masonry structure was put up by builders, and I put on the roof and did all the finishing work inside.

Most New Zealand houses are of light timber frame construction. Traditionally they were woefully insulated, and built with no consideration either for the sun or for a sense of connection to the outdoors and the site. They were also very noisy, with timber floors booming like drums and thin walls doing little to contain sounds. Coming from Britain, we were used to the greater solidity and permanence of houses like our stone Northumbrian cottage (and could not believe it when we first saw a house being moved on a truck!). I would have liked to build in mud brick or rammed earth, but there was neither precedent nor bricks in Hawke's Bay. Trucking in materials and fighting the council's building department was more than we could afford in time or money. Fortuitously, a new insulating plaster had just been put on the market which made concrete blocks acceptable for house-building under recently upgraded building code insulation requirements. It was an opportunity worth seizing. We built with the locally made concrete blocks, which still gave the building the good thermal mass I was after. Now I would avoid concrete and steel as much as possible, because they are responsible for high carbon emissions, and would make more effort to use mud brick.



Campbell House 1996
Mangapoke Road, Wairoa.

The house I designed uses passive solar heating as much as possible, with large north-west-facing windows and insulation under the slab. This system is best suited to the mild local climate, keeping the house warm in winter and cool in summer. With recycled Marseilles tiles on the roof and a simple plastered exterior and interior, it has a sort of Mediterranean look which we emphasised with bright colour detailing. I also designed the layout with amicable family living in mind. While the house is small, at 140 square metres, it is still able to keep adults and children apart in their own separate wings, each of which has its own bathroom. We can come together when we want to in the central communal living area, which has large french doors opening on to the garden.

This house also had the quite unexpected result of opening up a whole new area of work for me. The company selling the plaster and blocks used our