

7 December 1999 - 5 April 2000

Sculpture

in the gardens



by Felicity Milburn, Curator

Sculpture *in the gardens*

Since 1993, Christchurch's expansive Botanic Gardens have provided the backdrop for *Sculpture in the Gardens*, a biennial event jointly presented by the Robert McDougall Art Gallery and the Botanic Gardens to celebrate contemporary New Zealand sculpture. The three artists chosen to participate in this year's exhibition, Paul Cullen, Stuart Griffiths and Fiona Gunn, share an intention to look beyond the Gardens as merely a setting for sculpture. They have created instead site-specific work which plays on, and reveals, the environmental, spatial and historical resonance of their chosen sites, challenging the notion of 'garden' itself.

Although originally intended as botanic gardens in the truest sense - a systematic collection of plants arranged along taxonomic principles under scientific management - Christchurch's Gardens were planned aesthetically, revealing the influence of Victorian garden design. The park-like avenues, closely mown lawns, large specimen trees and specialist feature areas - water, rose and rock gardens, the herbaceous border - suggest an agenda which values attractive vistas and public appeal, at least as highly as scientific research.



Artificial and highly subjective in their construction, the Gardens represent much more than botanic experimentation or public recreation. They capture and reflect the attitudes and beliefs of the generations that have shaped them from their beginnings in the 1860s to the present day. Created so early in the European colonisation of New Zealand, the Gardens illustrate the attempts by new immigrants to adapt to their new and unfamiliar surroundings by viewing them through an imported cultural framework. The celebrated 'Englishness' of the Gardens, and of Christchurch, has its roots in both an aesthetic rejection of the vernacular landscape and a nostalgic attachment to the 'old country'; both of which resulted in the reworking of the local environment into a more familiar form.



The original 'native' section of Christchurch's Botanic Gardens, established in 1937 in the name of renowned botanist and New Zealand flora expert Dr Leonard Cockayne, presents native species in a distinctly European layout. At first, additions to the Gardens reflected the city's close ties to the British Empire; the first tree, a Common Oak, was planted in 1863 on the occasion of the royal marriage of Prince Albert Edward to Princess Alexandra of Denmark. Later trees, native to continents beyond Europe, document the gradual broadening of Christchurch's international relations.

Through oblique, enigmatic and challenging works, the three artists in this year's *Sculpture in the Gardens* exhibition encourage us to consider more carefully the concept of the 'garden' and its particular construction within the Christchurch locale. These temporary installations investigate and explore the subtle dynamics and histories of the parallel, permanent construction of the garden setting.

The artists would like to thank the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts, especially David Healy, the McDougall Art Gallery staff, and the gardeners of the Botanic Gardens: Maria Adamski, Angus Allan and Dean Pendrigh .

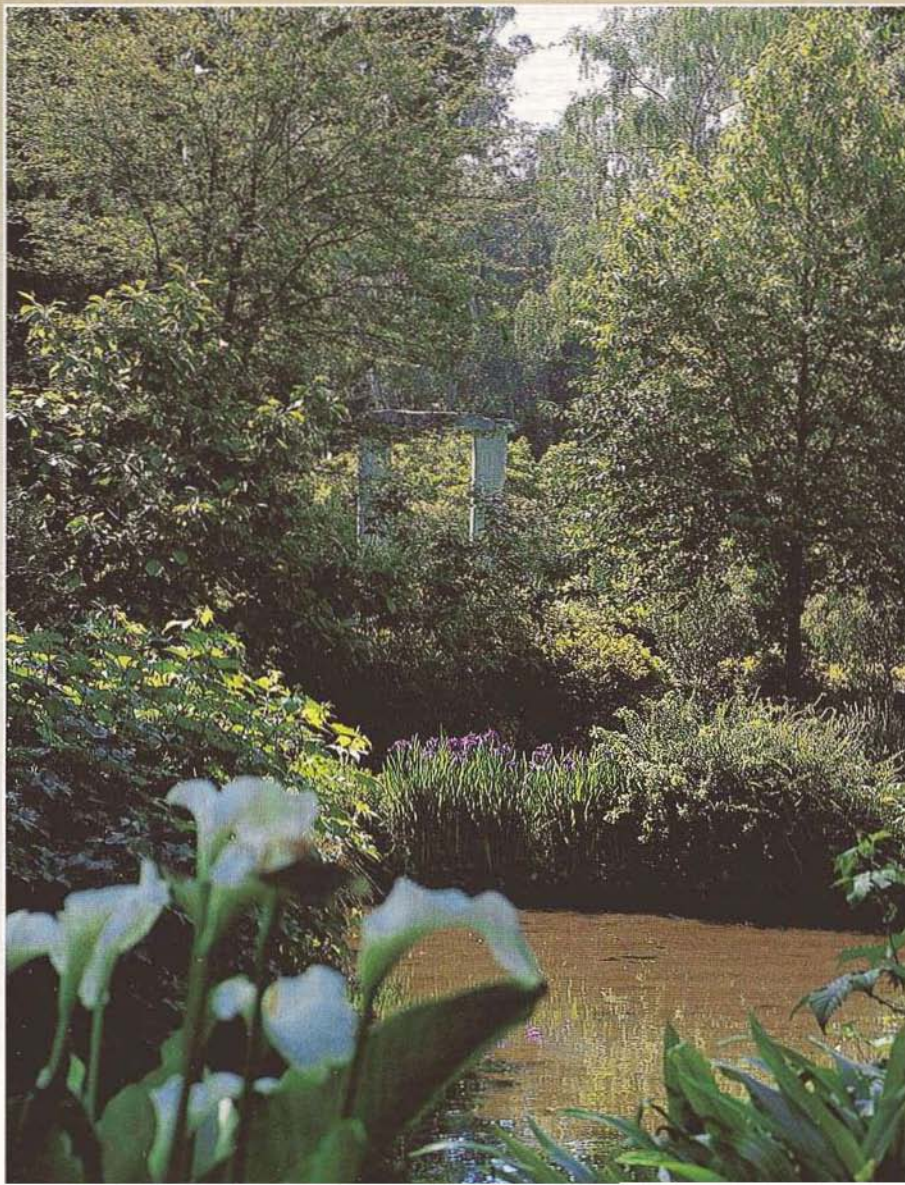
Photography by Brendan Lee and Lloyd Park (front cover).



stuart griffiths

an inside outlook

By creating a monumental frame from heavily grained slabs of chlorite schist, Stuart Griffiths alludes to the deliberate construction of views within the Botanic Gardens and the tradition of landscape gardening in general. Situated in a small, secluded area on the west extension of the Gardens, this masonry window is poised on the edge of a flower bed. Approachable from either side, the sculpture performs a double act of conventional garden framing by both focusing on a particularly important or attractive tree, in this case a towering oak, and picking out an attractive vista.



An inside outlook heightens our awareness of an underlying architectural schema within this seemingly 'natural' setting. Griffiths' carefully constructed masonry window acts as an unassuming but deliberate stage direction. The spectator realises that a view is being dictated, however gently, in much the same way as the Gardens themselves present an artificial reality as a fait accompli. This sense of theatricality alludes to another botanical convention, the eighteenth-century 'folly', in which ornamental houses and ruins were constructed by wealthy and eccentric landowners to highlight particular sections of a garden or landscape. Whimsical, nostalgic and often elaborate, these faked ruins were designed to present highlights of a garden to their best advantage. The grey-green colour of the rock and its strong horizontal grain ensure that the sculpture, while a significant presence in the garden, is integrated within the landscape like a natural element rather than a contrived embellishment.

As the title of Griffiths' sculpture suggests, even as the frame concentrates our focus on the exterior, visual world, it turns our focus inward, to a world of nostalgia, imagination and memory. An incomplete architectural fragment, Griffiths' work recalls the neglected ruins of an old homestead, acting as a window through time, as well as space, to invoke the presence of a real or imagined past. The personal scale provided by Griffiths' chosen setting contributes to a domestic reading of the work, as does the exaggerated perspective which is reminiscent of the way that objects from our childhood loom larger in our memory than in actuality.

paul cullen

incident at Z-152

Obscure, ambiguous and vaguely malignant, Paul Cullen's sculpture was developed within the context of the past and present scientific uses of his chosen site. His enigmatically technical trolley and enclosure are placed on the location of the old Magnetic Observatory, which was decommissioned in 1930 after being rendered useless by increasing electrical interference from urban development. After the buildings were dismantled they were replaced by the New Zealand National Gravity Base Station, and the site has been occupied by the Climatology Station since 1881.

Even without an awareness of the site's history, Cullen's sculpture conveys a compelling sense of analysis and experimentation. This atmosphere of research and design is echoed in the systematically arranged trial plots located nearby, where plants are tested for their suitability to the local climate. The trolley, weighted lines, rails and suspended bucket all seem designed for some distinct, but undetectable purpose - perhaps part of a more covert trial which may at this very moment be underway. The mesh enclosure brings with it an element of exclusion, as though what occurs inside is something we cannot be part of, except in a strictly observational role.

Cullen's work encourages us to speculate - playing with our perceptions and preconceptions of scientific truth. It seems clear that the equipment is specifically designed to measure or evaluate something, but just what is being tested, and by whom, is undisclosed. In all, there is a sense of barely contained action, as if at any moment the experiment will begin, or end. This potential for movement reaches its climax at the point where the mesh fence closes off the rails. The extension of the rails beyond the fence suggests that at some stage the trolley has passed, or might be expected to venture, beyond the enclosure's limits. What would it take for it to move past this point and what would the significance of that be? By creating a device which can apparently detect something invisible to the human eye, Cullen reinforces the invisible and slightly mysterious nature of physical forces such as gravity, magnetism and inertia, manufacturing an uneasy atmosphere full of calculations (and potential consequences) we are not (and may never be) privy to.



fiona gunn *to seed*

Focusing on the exchange of seed and living plants that occurred between England and New Zealand at the time the Christchurch Botanic Gardens were being planned and planted, Fiona Gunn's *to seed* examines the role of the Gardens as a location for cultural transfer. Poised eccentrically on an edge of the immaculate and expansive Archery Lawn, an elegant cast iron table and chair appear strangely out of place, their domestic proportions a striking contrast to the stately formality of their surroundings. Distinctly *not* garden furniture, the dislocation of these elements within their botanical setting highlights the incongruous nature of this supposedly 'natural' space.



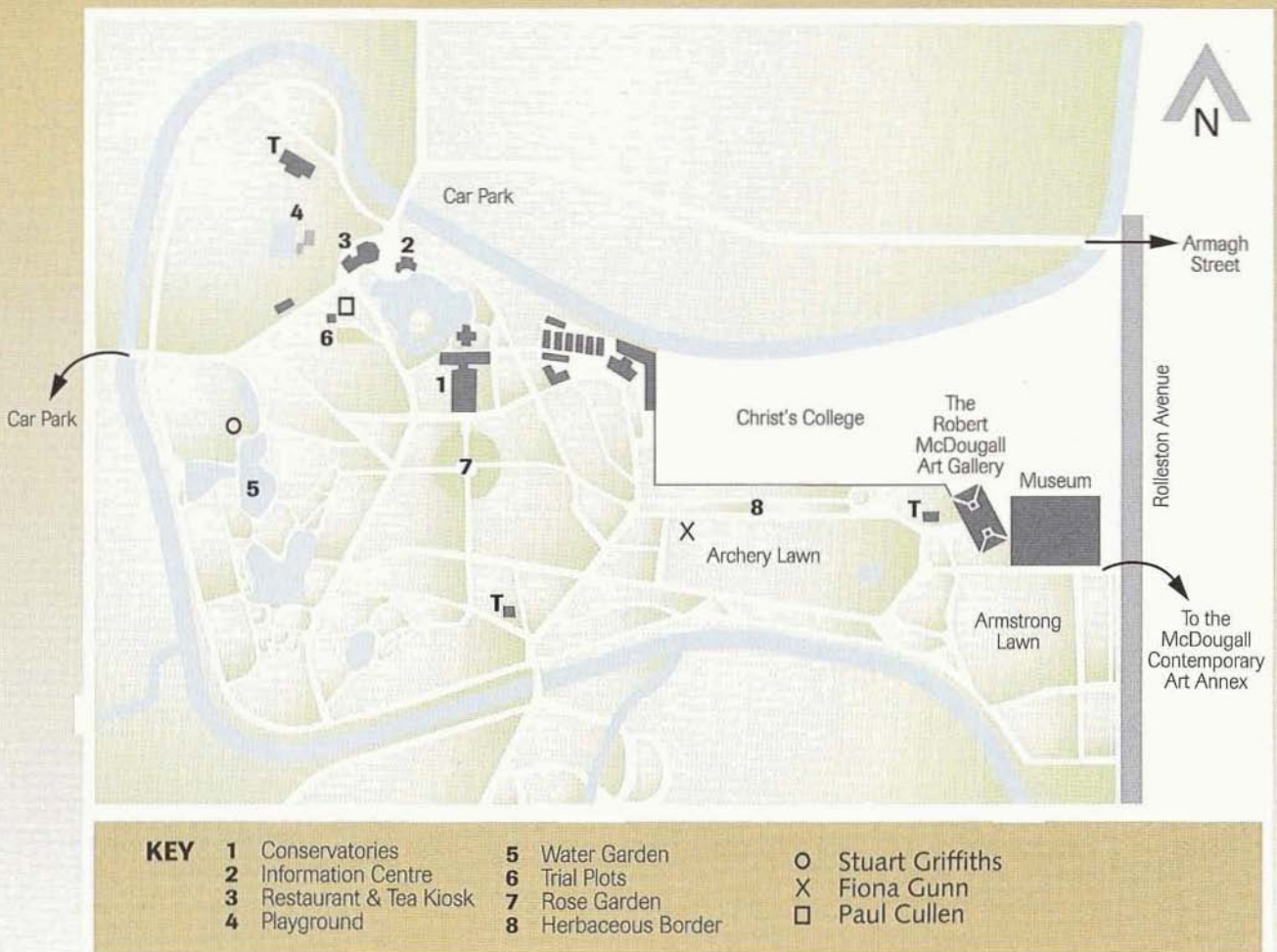
The sculpture's title and the fact that the grass site itself is also 'going to seed' allude to the early origins of the Gardens. The first curator, Mr J.F. Armstrong, is credited with introducing and acclimatising over 4,000 different plant species. Most were sent by ship, many from Kew Gardens in London, but also from Australia, the Americas, Europe, India and beyond. The resulting garden reflects a passion for the exotic over the indigenous environment - American redwoods, Canary Island pines and English oaks are planted alongside native Kauri while almost nothing of the original landscape remains. Although specifically linked to the development of the Gardens, the seeds also support a wider analogy - that of all immigrants to this place who change, and are changed by, the nature of their new home.

The exchange of plants and culture between New Zealand and other countries reflected the attitudes of an age in which anything exotic was to be plundered and collected, whereas the native flora and fauna were replaced by European equivalents. Seed from native New Zealand plants was sent back to England for scientific study, while an early function of the Christchurch Botanic Gardens was as an acclimatising zone for colonial gardens. The Gardens represent a vision of 'Nature' which has no place in reality, but is rather an artificial construct that draws its character not only from New Zealand's early ties to the Empire, but also from the interaction between its diverse and hybrid elements.

While we may view the Gardens as a passive and constant environment for enjoying the pleasures of Nature, Gunn's work emphasises the discordant, random quality of the area; a site of negotiation, cross-fertilisation and transplanted culture. The dynamic nature of this location is reinforced by the asymmetric placement of the table. The crumbly orange rust which advances slowly across the table's surface simultaneously highlights the subjective nature of what we consider beautiful or worthwhile and suggests the exciting possibilities of such an exchange.



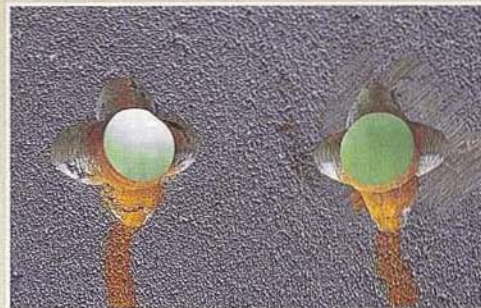
map of the gardens





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