

Sculpture in the Gardens

TRANSITION@CHANGE

8 DECEMBER 2001 - 7 APRIL 2002

Bing Dawe
Enid Eiriksson
Kazu Nakagawa

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Sculpture in the Gardens *by Felicity Milburn, Curator*

TRANSITION AND CHANGE

Transition and change, the theme that motivates and links the three works in this year's **Sculpture in the Gardens** exhibition, seems especially appropriate for a botanical setting. A garden is, after all, an environment of constant alteration and adaptation, a place where hundreds of thousands of life-forms intersect in a larger cycle of growth, decay and regeneration. It is fitting too, that the focus of this fifth biennial collaboration between the Robert McDougall Art Gallery and the Christchurch Botanic Gardens reflects the mood of the moment, as the Gallery prepares for the transition between its current Gardens location and the purpose-built Christchurch Art Gallery (due to open in April 2003).

The Gardens themselves have gone through many changes, most significantly in their rapid metamorphosis from unprepossessing sand hills, swampland and shingle pits to their carefully manicured modern state. The establishment of a public reserve may seem a surprising priority for Canterbury's early settlers, but nevertheless, the area that now contains Hagley Park and the Botanic Gardens was set aside as early as 1855, with the provision that the Superintendent of the province could 'let the same on lease, put roads through it (and) make plantations and gardens'.¹ The Canterbury Horticultural and Acclimatisation Society was established in 1864, with the aim of 'introducing and acclimatising plants likely to be of benefit to the colony and to the establishment of a Botanic Gardens'.² After the removal of a number of grazing cattle, the transformation of tussock, toi toi, spear grass, flax, manuka and matagouri into a formal Botanic Garden in the English tradition began at the site now known as the Archery Lawn. Now, the most dramatic transitions in the Gardens are seasonal ones, from the spectacular floral displays of spring and summer to the changing colours of autumn and the austere prominence of deciduous trees in winter.



This year's participating artists, Bing Dawe, Enid Eiriksson and Kazu Nakagawa, work within three very different creative aesthetics, but all share an interest in the processes of evolution and alteration, both natural and imposed. Dawe's work considers the point of collision and exchange between human and natural worlds, while Eiriksson's investigates the coincidences and cross-fertilisations that occur between organic structure and architecture. Carefully interred in their pine mound site, Nakagawa's enigmatically scripted panels suggest that life and death are not opposites, but rather part of an ongoing, and inescapable, continuum. Present in the work of all three is the challenge to acknowledge, and even celebrate, the processes of transition and change – the only certainties in a garden, and perhaps in life.

1. *A Garden Century: the Christchurch Botanic Gardens*
Ed. Barnett, Gilpin & Metcalf, Christchurch City Council, 1963,
p.19
2. *Ibid*, p.23

The artists installing their works
From Left: Bing Dawe, Enid Eiriksson,
Kazu Nakagawa



Bing Dawe

The Draining - formal composition with eels and hoops (2001)

Placed at a point in the Gardens where the riverbank gently widens beside the Avon, Dawe's sculpture consists of three blackened rings – resolutely formal elements that he has grouped together in such a way as to offer and invite interpretation. Gracing each simple steel band is an eel, cast in bronze, but artfully darkened to a muted, lifelike patina. This combination of the formal and the symbolic, the exquisite and the unsettling, is a recurring theme in Dawe's work. The use of the river is also characteristic, but, though previously present only in allusion, here it is a key component of the landscape, a conduit for the cycles and currents of nature and human existence.

While one circle stands apart, the other two are laced together by virtue of their sinuous adornments. Two noughts intersect, joined by a cross. Such a simple reading, however, does not fully represent Dawe's intentions – since a nought and a cross can both mean nothing, just as a positive sign and a circle both suggest completion. Typically,

Dawe's work does not offer straightforward equations, nor certain conclusions – but rather a nebulous eddying of alternatives and contributing factors. For this reason, *The Draining* rewards contemplation from a number of angles, both physical and cognitive.

The ground in which the sculpture rests is a drained wetland and, by recalling this history, Dawe positions the eel as both the victim and survivor of human interference in the landscape. Seen from grass level, the three hoops suggest the narrow cross-sections of a pipe – a taciturn reference to the massive concrete drain segments left beside the Waitaki River after the completion of the Benmore dam. Alternatively, the blackened rings could be interpreted as an aerial view of the charred stone circles from old Maori hangi sites still occasionally seen in the ploughed earth beside New Zealand rivers. In these contexts, the rings represent slices of human history – those microseconds of presence in the river's long existence. The conversion of the eel from its sleek undulations as a living creature to its passive role as a gutted food source, captured where the two circles intersect, represents the collision of our earthly orbits. Like the lens of a telescope, Dawe's steel circles let us view the cycles of eel, river and humanity as though from a distance, allowing us to appreciate their interdependent, but often precarious, co-existence.

Born in Glenavy, near Oamaru in 1952, Dawe studied at the University of Canterbury, graduating with a Diploma in Sculpture in 1976. Since 1989 he has been the Programme Coordinator for the Bachelor of Design (formerly the Diploma of Craft Design) at the Christchurch Institute of Technology. Dawe has exhibited throughout New Zealand and has completed many public commissions. In 1999, he was the recipient of the prestigious Visa Gold/James Wallace Award.



Bing Dawe *The Draining - formal composition with eels and hoops*
Above left: Installation Below left: Detail

Enid Eiriksson

Inside - outside-in (2001)



A sparkling, jewel-like bubble adrift on a small pond, Enid Eiriksson's *Inside, outside-in* seems initially irreconcilable with its botanical surroundings. Its outwardly foreign appearance, however, belies a variety of connections to its location, both specific and indirect.

In its materials and internal structure, the sculpture is in fact an oblique tribute to Cunningham House, the older of the Gardens' two conservatories. Opened in 1923, this large building houses a significant collection of exotic trees, shrubs and smaller plants. Its construction is bold and distinctive, featuring a series of steel beams arching past a raised gallery to a central point and a curved exterior roof, both of which lend it an elegantly organic air. These architectural elements are echoed in Eiriksson's convex structure, wherein she also explores connections to the glasshouse's botanical contents. Within her faceted hemisphere, curved aluminium tubes assume the form of an over-arching punga tree and echo the conservatory's protective canopy of tall vegetation, which filters the light and increases the humidity levels to allow delicate species to thrive in jungle-like conditions beneath. In contrast to Cunningham House, which is defined by the rarity of what it protects, Eiriksson's reflective dome contains only an intangible interweaving of light, reflection and shadow.

Inside, outside-in presents both private and public faces, with rows of transparent panels allowing glimpses of the interior structure, while other sections return the colours and shapes of the trees and plants nearby. With an exterior shape that suggests both an inversion of the pond in which it is placed and a glistening droplet of dew, the pale green metal structure, at once modern and historical, also references the foliage of the surrounding water lilies and alpine garden.

Even as it acknowledges the historic presence of Cunningham House and the surrounding natural environment, Eiriksson's sculpture also alludes to the influence of recent organic-inspired architecture. A deliberate fusion of nature and architecture, past and present, it complements the hybrid environment in which it is placed. The Gardens, initially established along traditional English lines, are now home to an eclectic medley of botanical species from all over the world, including plantings that reflect New Zealand's original vegetation. Native pigeons, fantails and wax-eyes share their habitat with introduced ducks, blackbirds, thrush, sparrows and finches. In such a setting, where 100 year old trees grow alongside newly planted spring flowers, Eiriksson's floating amalgam of reference and reflection begins to seem more at home.

Born in Timaru in 1943, Eiriksson first attended the University of Canterbury School of Fine Art in the 1960s then travelled to London to study jewellery fabrication at the John Cass School of Art. She returned to the University in the 1990s, graduating in 2000 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Sculpture). During her time at University she was co-winner of both the Jane Rounick Memorial Fund (1999 and 2000) and the Rosemary Johnson Muller scholarship (2000).

Enid Eiriksson
Inside - outside-in
Below: Installation
Above right: Detail





Kazu Nakagawa

'dreams' dreams (2001)

Encircled by a towering cluster of maritime pines, two simple panels, one light, one dark, occupy a circle of grass like memorials to an undisclosed event. Located on one of the Garden's only original sand hills, Kazu Nakagawa's *'dreams' dreams* builds on the stillness and solitude of its distinctive location, creating an atmosphere redolent with unspoken memories.

Formed from screen-printed canvases layered thickly with gesso and resin, the surfaces of these objects at first appear almost blank, but in fact contain a variety of half obscured marks. Half-hidden beneath a series of shroud-like layers, the text reads "dreams" – a silent testimonial to private hopes, wishes, doubts and fears. Silky smooth, suggesting the monumentality of stone, the panels resemble markers, tombs or headstones, yet provide no immediately legible reference to past or future events.

Ambiguously elegiac, Nakagawa's exquisitely crafted sculptures explore matter and nothingness, acknowledging that architecture, even the architecture of a garden, is made up at least as much of absence as presence. In this quietly theatrical setting, the gaps between the pines and the circle of 'empty' sky above are as powerful as the obvious elements of tree, ground and sculpture. Materiality becomes an imprecise notion, an uncertain measure further challenged by the presence of these enigmatic panels. Why place them here? What do they cover, what do they mark? Conclusions are not readily available, or necessarily helpful, when considering Nakagawa's work. It succeeds in the moment *between* thoughts – at the second before the mind decides what the eye transmits, in the moment we really see what is in front of us. Increasingly, *'dreams' dreams* seems to speak of what is *not* here.

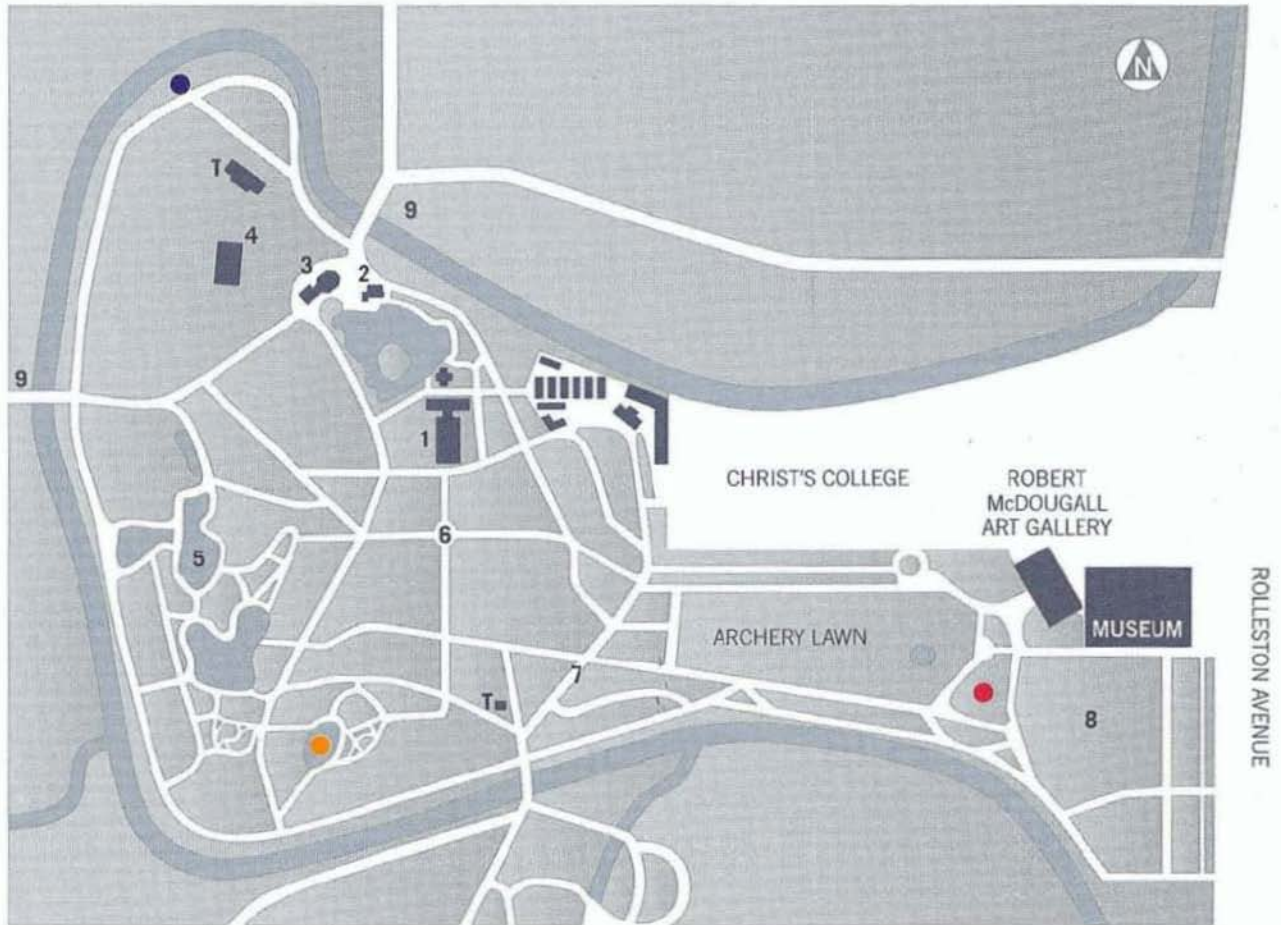
In this secluded location, which has remained almost unchanged since the days of the first European settlers, the past seems closer than anywhere else in the Gardens. Like a pair of revolving doors, Nakagawa's panels are portals between life and death, between materiality and nothingness, between hope and despair. In their closeness, they seem to suggest that the distance travelled between these so-called opposites may not be so great as we believe.

Born in Tokyo, Japan, in 1957, Nakagawa graduated from the Tokyo University of Fisheries. He initially designed windsurfers and then worked as a furniture maker after studying at the Hatano Polytechnic between 1985 and 1986. He arrived in New Zealand in 1987 and currently lives on Waiheke Island. He has exhibited his work throughout New Zealand in both solo and group exhibitions.

Kazu Nakagawa *'dreams' dreams*
Above left: Installation Below right: Detail



Map of the Gardens



KEY

● Bing Dawe	1 Conservatories	4 Playground	7 Steps
● Enid Eiriksson	2 Information Centre	5 Water Garden	8 Armstrong Lawn
● Kazu Nakagawa	3 Restaurant & Tea Kiosk	6 Rose Garden	9 Car Parking

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Robert McDougall Art Gallery

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www.mcdougall.org.nz

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