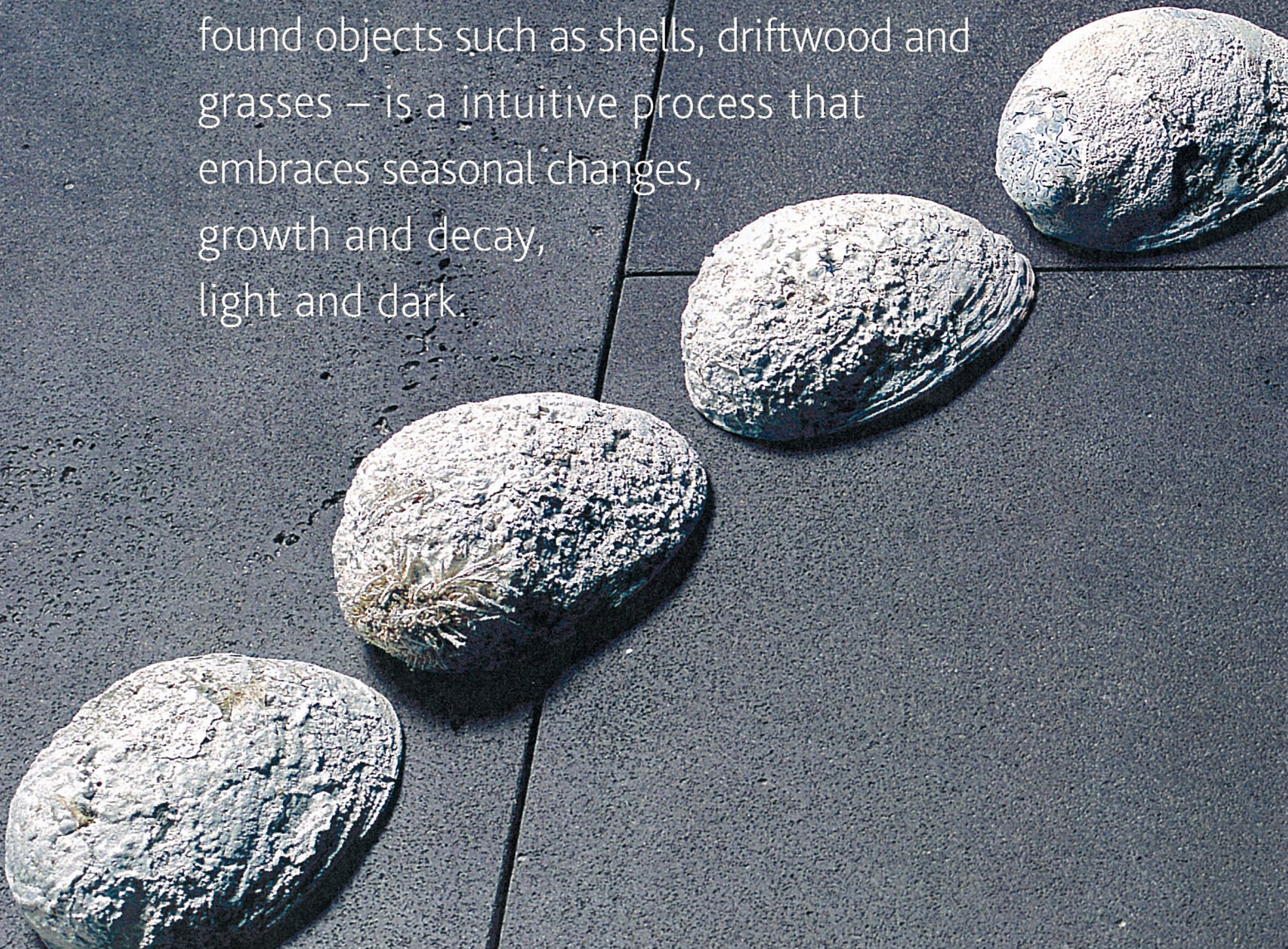


Judy McIntosh Wilson 13 February – 30 May 2004 Ravenscar & William A. Sutton Galleries

For North Canterbury artist Judy McIntosh Wilson, working with natural materials – found objects such as shells, driftwood and grasses – is an intuitive process that embraces seasonal changes, growth and decay, light and dark.





For many years, during her walks along Waikuku Beach, Wilson has gathered and collected artefacts washed up by the sea; these are then stored in her studio, considered and perhaps included in her ephemeral configurations. Wilson has moved from primarily making objects to installing temporary exhibitions that reflect the ways time changes the environment. Since childhood she has closely observed her

North Canterbury home, noting the developments and the conditions that shape the history and geography of place. As she says, **'The interest and challenge of ephemeral work is in doing it. I enjoy creating an atmosphere in place and time and then it gets taken away. I just do what I want to do – it's so much my life, the seasonal changes and yearly patterns.'**



Left:
Making Tracks 2 (details),
2004, pipi shells

Double page:
Making Tracks 3 (detail),
2004, paua shells



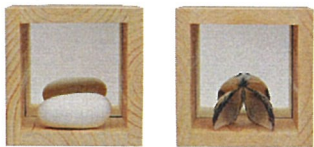
Making Tracks 5 (detail), 2004, marram grass roots

Wilson's fascination with the marks left on the sandy beaches of Waikuku, both by the tide and by animals and humans, is central to **Making Tracks**. She has studied, photographed and drawn these patterns over many years, and her interior installations reflect this ordinary, yet fascinating phenomenon.



Wilson reorganises her chosen organic materials into floor patterns such as circles, spirals, tracks and meandering lines. This careful placement suggests a desire to become involved in the cycles of growth, change and decay, not so much to control as to be closer to them. In **Making Tracks**, circles of biscuit and paua shells evoke planetary systems and the ebb and flow of earthly tides. Driftwood is arranged in a figure of eight – the infinity symbol for many cultures – while two perfect spheres have been formed from multiple layers of grass seeds and roots over a period of ten years.

Creating such art works out of nature itself has always been part of Wilson's practice. After graduating from the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts in 1958 with a Diploma in Sculpture, she embarked on a successful career as a fibre artist.¹ After extensive research and experimentation with the possibilities of fibre, Wilson returned to sculpture in the 1980s. *Two Craters* (1994), her permanent sculpture for the Krakamarken Nature Art Park, Denmark, *Tall Poppies* (1994) and *Earthwalk: A Survey* (1981–98) all speak of Wilson's interest in, and dialogue with, such natural materials as stone, boulders, flax, bark, shells and wood.



Making Tracks 7 (detail), 2004, pine (boxes) and mixed media (contents)

Land Art draws upon ancient imagery, ciphers and myths, intimately incorporating the processes of nature and culture as delineated by the artist. Unlike Richard Long's nomadic Land Art performances or Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, however, Wilson's work avoids socio-political concerns such as the precarious ecology of the environment or the impingement of culture on nature. Instead, Wilson works in a gallery setting, drawing simply and beautifully on the cyclical, perennial movements of the earth and the rituals associated with seeking and transposing material found in the landscape. She identifies both the formal and metaphorical aspects of shells, wood and seeds, and her heightened awareness of the qualities inherent in found objects imbues her work with a minimal order: **'I like to make things simple, to make the true forms more obvious, enhancing the essential. The less I need to use to express my ideas the better.'**

Wilson's fascination with the marks left on the sandy beaches of Waikuku, both by the tide and by animals and humans, is also central to **Making Tracks**. She has studied, photographed and drawn these patterns over many years, and her interior installations reflect this ordinary, yet fascinating phenomenon. **'I started recording at the beach all the marks made by nature, humans, machines ... I am interested**

in the form of natural objects found there and the fact that they are living, organic.'

Transposing the natural to an artificial environment such as an art gallery suggests a sense of purpose, yet unforeseen connections and readings can emerge. Placing found objects in pine boxes, for instance, takes on a digital aspect – an elegant, mathematical compartmentalisation. Oppositions and similarities arise and reveal themselves: **'The work is about contrast, putting organic materials in an art gallery space – I feel it makes a much stronger statement, it could be called an interruption. I could not use shells in the landscape for instance.'**

Unlike free-standing sculpture, this gentle and neutral installation quietly and elegantly wends configurations on the floor, dramatically enhanced by the darkened atmosphere. Shells, carefully overlapping at precisely the right point, gleam like a strand of pearls or resemble the bare bones of a long spinal cord. They encircle the floor, enticing us to follow and explore the map-like markings elsewhere in the gallery. Tuatua shells are arranged to make an expansive cross, while crisp biscuit shells create radiating concentric circles, like the ripples in a still pool or marks left in the sand by the tide. Driftwood is carefully interlocked in a figure-of-eight pattern, while heavily encrusted paua shells, carefully placed, march methodically on



the periphery of an invisible circle. Pipi shells dance and run like small foot or paw prints, and pine boxes punctuating the wall offer glimpses of found treasure, illuminated from within by a mirror. Common yet extraordinary objects such as birds' nests, eggshells, feathers, crustations and dried plant matter, become inspirational artefacts, reminders of the passing yet ever renewable fragility of nature.

The two spheres of grass roots and burdock, collected with dedication in the right seasonal and weather conditions, resonate with delicate beauty. The extraordinary result of taking something so simple and sculpting the material steadily over time recalls Wilson's first love of fibre and weaving. Indeed over her career, containers, baskets, wrapping and weaving have been a consistent aesthetic language, now relayed through her fleeting patterns on the floor and through the feminine symbol of the shell as a pure container for life forms.

Wilson's ritual of accumulating material for her work springs from both the simple action of collecting and from the beauty of the objects. Because the material is easily manipulated, she can create the work herself, mapping new ideas and working through the process in a solitary and contemplative way.

'I have collected over many years and quite often if I have an idea for something I automatically know what materials I need to use

to express it. Sometimes I already have what I need in my studio, and sometimes I go out and collect it, searching for it. I have quite strong opinions on using the right material for the work. Once I get my idea I start using the actual materials on a smaller scale to see how it works.'

A sense of quiet mystery pervades **Making Tracks**. If you look closely, the macro detail on the surfaces of the shells reveal the winding tracks of even smaller creatures. It also evokes memories of New Zealand beaches, where objects are collected on walking expeditions, studied for their pleasing or unusual qualities and put in pockets to be taken home and stored for later contemplation. Avoiding any moralistic comment on the condition of nature and culture, **Making Tracks** reveals a journey that is intimate and personal, a closely observed and meticulously translated experience of New Zealand's coastal identity.

¹ Wilson became interested in working with fibre in the 1960s, and after moving to a farm outside Auckland she began weaving full time, selecting wool from her own flock of sheep. During the 1970s she exhibited her work nationally and internationally and completed numerous commissions, including wall hangings for embassies and consulates in Brussels, Bahrain, Canberra and New York.

Facing page:
Top: **Making Tracks 4** (detail),
2004, biscuit shells
Middle: **Making Tracks 1** (detail),
2004, driftwood
Bottom: **Making Tracks 3** (detail),
2004, paua shells

Making Tracks 5 (detail), 2004, burdock seeds



Judy McIntosh Wilson



Judy McIntosh Wilson graduated from the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts in 1958 and has since built a successful career as a fibre artist and sculptor. As well as producing a number of public commissions, she has exhibited regularly in group exhibitions both in New Zealand and internationally since the 1970s. *Two Craters* (1994), her permanent commission for the Krakamarken Nature Art Park in Denmark, and her exhibitions *Making Tracks* (2004), *Tall Poppies* (1994) and *Earthwalk: A Survey* (1981–98) are all examples of how the art of collection can successfully be combined with an appreciation of the natural environment. Judy lives and works in North Canterbury, New Zealand.



Making Tracks 3 (detail) 2004, paua shells

Getting Around



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TE PUNA O WAIWHETU

Worcester Boulevard, PO Box 2626,
Christchurch, New Zealand
Telephone: 64 3 941 7300
Facsimile: 64 3 941 7301

Email: info@christchurchartgallery.org.nz
www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Curator: Felicity Milburn
Publications Coordinator: Sarah Pepperle
Writer: Jennifer Hay
Editor: Anna Rogers
Photographer: Brendan Lee
Designer: Emma Vial

ISBN 0-9088-7442-1

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Making Tracks exhibition list

Making Tracks 1
2004
Driftwood

Making Tracks 2
2004
Pipi shells

Making Tracks 3
2004
Paua shells

Making Tracks 4
2004
Biscuit shells

Making Tracks 5
2004
Burdock seeds &
marram grass roots

Making Tracks 6
2004
Tuatua shells

Making Tracks 7
2004
Pine (boxes) and mixed
media (contents)



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