

T H E G O R S E K I N G

DENIS O'CONNOR

THE ROBERT MCDUGALL ART GALLERY

11 APRIL - 13 MAY 1992

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EAR NEIL,

EACH OF THE IMAGES IN THE TABLEAU CAN BE READ AS HAVING NUMEROUS ASSOCIATIONS AND IT IS THIS VERY MULTIPLICITY OF CONNECTIONS and correlations that gives this work its central theme.

The geographical setting is (like the Birdman and the Engineer) again the desert heartland of Central Otago. The Landscape of Revelation. A common sight in this landscape are monumental cairns of white quartz and schist. These form strong visual focal points in otherwise endless expanses of tussock and cleared land. Occasionally too, lengths of uprooted or abandoned railway-track, vestiges of early rail networks. These lie like discarded frames or margin-lines, like this sentence across an empty page. Something about the sight of these mounds of rock and strips of rusting metal found me walking back into my child-hood – a railway line was never far away.

The single object that most locates the Gorse-King to the place is the six-sided sundial left to us by a Shetland Island stonemason named Andrew Mitchel. The Historic Places Trust tell us that in 1876 he began chipping at a towering outcrop of stone on some land he'd purchased near Roxburgh. Some twenty years later, with the accumulated chips of those years, he had constructed himself a superbly crafted stone house, various out-buildings, water-races lined with the fragments and all enclosed within a great dry-stone wall. All that remained of that original landmark was a neat, dressed hexagonal sundial on its levelled pad of stone. Or is it a sundial? Six-sided plinths or pedestals can be still seen in prehistoric stone complexes in Druidic Scotland and Ireland. Spirit benches, prehistoric altars of early Celtic communities. This sundial could very well be one of the pakeha New Zealanders early sacred touchstones to the older cultures of Europe. Cultures that did measure the movements of the sun and the seasons with stone.

PAINTING THE STONES

THE FRAGMENTED KNEELING (THE GESTURE OF RECONCILIATION) FIGURE IS PAINTING THIS MOUND OF STONE WITH EARTH-ochre pigment.

This sequence has origins in A dream I had sometime during the mid 1970's. I last used this image in a work I made in 1980 and have waited until now to fully explore its narrative possibilities. As a child the 'snow-ceming' of our stucco state-house was an annual rite of renewal, and on a recent trip to South-West Ireland I noted with interest the layered skins of the stone architecture. Lemon ochres, dusty ambers, ailed cadmiums

FORWARD NOTE

SCULPTURE HAS ALWAYS PRESENTED ACCOMMODATION DIFFICULTIES FOR THE ROBERT McDougall ART GALLERY. HAVING NO LIFT, IT IS PHYSICALLY IMPOSSIBLE TO CARRY LARGE, HEAVY WORKS TO AND FROM STORAGE BELOW THE GALLERY. ACQUISITIONS HAVE NECESSARILY BEEN LIMITED TO WORKS OF A MANAGEABLE, MODEST DIMENSION AND WEIGHT. TO OVERCOME OUR DIFFICULTIES, IT WAS DECIDED IN 1984 THAT WE WOULD BEST BE ABLE TO PURSUE A PROGRAMME OF SIGNIFICANT ACQUISITIONS BY COMMISSIONING WORKS FROM SCULPTORS BRIEFED TO THE GALLERY'S LIMITATIONS. IN 1985 BING DAWE'S "KEEPING HIS BALANCE. . ." WAS COMMISSIONED FOR THE AERIAL SPACE ABOVE THE CENTRE COURT. TWO YEARS LATER AN INVITATION WAS EXTENDED TO DENIS O'CONNOR. BECAUSE OF HEAVY COMMITMENTS, HE WAS UNABLE TO COMMENCE THE PROJECT UNTIL 1989. NOW, WITH THE ASSISTANCE FROM THE QUEEN ELIZABETH II'S CONTEMPORARY ART ACQUISITIONS PROGRAMME, THE WORK "GORSE KING" HAS BEEN COMPLETED. THE GALLERY IS DELIGHTED TO ADD THIS MAJOR WORK BY DENIS O'CONNOR TO ITS COLLECTION OF NEW ZEALAND SCULPTURE.

IT IS PART OF THE SCULPTOR'S TOTAL CONCEPTION OF THE GORSE KING SERIES THAT HIS STATEMENT CONCERNING THE WORK BE PUBLISHED WITH ITS FIRST SHOWING SO THAT THERE SHOULD BE NO MISUNDERSTANDING OF HIS INTENTION.

THE GALLERY EXTENDS ITS CONGRATULATIONS TO DENIS O'CONNOR FOR HIS ACHIEVEMENT IN THIS WORK AND ITS APPRECIATION TO THE QUEEN ELIZABETH II ARTS COUNCIL FOR ITS CONTRIBUTION TOWARDS THE PROJECT.

JOHN COLEY
ART GALLERY MANAGER

INTRODUCTION

AS EARLY AS 1987 DENIS O'CONNOR HAD BEEN MAKING PREPARATORY DRAWINGS FOR A LARGE CARVED LIMESTONE NARRATIVE INSTALLATION WHICH WAS INITIALLY TITLED 'GORSELANDS'. IT WAS INTENDED TO BE COMPLETED AS AN AUTOBIOGRAPHIC TRILOGY AND WOULD THIS

sulphurous golds, revealing the subtle tonal metamorphosis year by year. My father must have participated in this repaint often. I, of course, practice this process with my art, but the transmission of values from father to son is a dimension I'd like to emphasise here. The business of Art Making may be an act of renewal and metamorphosis (it can often be sublime stupidity too). Mention needs to be made here of the golden gorse flower. So much a part of the New Zealand landscape. In ruled lines of hedge rows throughout the South Island or endless wastelands of hills and dark gilded valleys in the North Island. Again a distinctive carpet of this thorny plant pervades my childhood. I didn't know it then, that it nurtured a new native forest under the layer of drying prickles and rotting surveyors pegs. On the fringes of the big cities new housing estates mushroomed in gorselands such as these. The cairn of stones about to bloom a gorse-gold bouquet has many evocations then! The hand held paint brush dripping it's aurum pigment is framed within an architectural rondel. This was modelled after the example high up in the spandrels of the atrium of the McDougall Gallery where the installation will be exhibited. This rondel or tondo is echoed by the circular motifs throughout the work. The lens-eyes of the binoculars and camera. The beam-of-light torch glass. The pre-decimal threepence and sixpenny coins, the flattened copper currency on the railway tracks. The gaping circle of the baptismal font holding it's ochre pigment. The round loaf of my fathers soda-bread (again baked once a year, commemorating his emigration and life-long exile). I suppose the sun itself is evoked with the presence of the controversial sundial. But is shouldn't be forgotten that the tondo also conjures up references to the minds-eye and the replenishing powers of the imagination.

STONE AS PEDESTAL

EACH INDIVIDUAL CAIRN-STONE HAS A FOSSILISED COMPONENT WITHIN IT, UNDERLYING THE GEOLOGICAL NATURE OF LIMESTONE, ITSELF host to numerous plant and marine animals deposited back in its sedimentary beginnings. Stories within stories.

I've tried to keep in motion the allusions to classical architecture too, suggesting, albeit obliquely, that there is irony in the ideal we imagine classicism represents. It is not by chance that the Gallery itself borrows some of its detailing from an era of classicism? The torch lies for all the world like a fallen column because of its exaggerated scale. It's also a telamon (male figure).

The binoculars, could be fragmented balustrade.

The rolled sleeping bag, a dislodged capital

the telamon's head, the 'place' where he dreams

The camera, the abstract cube of its base.

All these objects are in a sense, aids to the process of seeing, looking, scrutinising, and especially, framing. The torch looks into the darkness, binoculars magnify distances and separate us too. The camera records within a frame and isolates.

I also had strongly in my mind with these objects certain key artist in 20th Century Art History who explored their metaphorical possibilities.

The Torch is the same one Jasper Johns cast in his 1968 Pop Art icon. (J.J. is inscribed on it's lid). Claus Oldenburgh, another sculptor of the Pop era made binoculars as

INCORPORATE OTHER WORKS LIKE 'BRANCHES FROM THE WISHING TREE' (1985-86), 'THE BIRDMAN AND THE ENGINEER' 1988 NOW IN THE AUCKLAND CITY ART GALLERY COLLECTION, AND IMAGINED LANDSCAPE SETTINGS. THE THEMATIC CONCERN OF 'GORSSELANDS' O'CONNOR CONSIDERED WOULD EXPLORE THE FORMATIVE WORLDS BUT ADD A MORE VISIONARY DIMENSION. PART OF THIS MULTIPIECE INSTALLATION WOULD BE PAINTED WITH A GOLDEN YELLOW LIME WASH PIGMENT SYMBOLIC OF THE GORSE FLOWER.

THE REPEATED USE OF CARVED PRE-DECIMAL COINAGE IMAGERY WAS ALSO IMPORTANT, 'TO SET A METAPHOR OF 'CURRENCY' STRONGLY IN MOTION.'¹

IN OCTOBER 1989 DENIS O'CONNOR VISITED THE GALLERY AND SELECTED A SITE FOR A WORK WHICH HE TITLED 'THE GORSE KING' (THE SON) INTENDED AS PART TWO OF THE 'GORSSELANDS' TRILOGY. PART ONE WAS TO BE GROUP OF TEN WALL SCULPTURES ENTITLED 'THEATRE OF DUST' (THE FATHER) AND PART THREE 'A HISTORY OF STONE' (THE HOLY GHOST). THESE ARE YET TO BE COMPLETED. IT WAS DECIDED THAT 'THE GORSE KING' WOULD BE DESIGNED AS A FLOOR SCULPTURE FOR THE GALLERY'S CENTRE COURT.

IN ITS CONCEPTION O'CONNOR EVENTUALLY TOOK SEVERAL ELEMENTS OF THE CLASSICAL ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES WHICH DECORATE THE SPACE AND THESE WERE COMBINED WITH THOSE OF VERNACULAR AND INDUSTRIAL TRADITIONS. SUCH REFERENCES HEIGHTENED THE MANY THEMES HE EXPLORED. OF THIS HE HAS WRITTEN 'THE LAYERED THEMES EXPLORE THE FORMATIVE WORLDS OF BOYHOOD AND DREAM EXTENDING TO THE WIDER CONTEXTS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY AND OUR RELATIONSHIP TO THE LANDSCAPE AND THE ONGOING DIALOGUE IN CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICE, WITH ART HISTORY'.²

BY FEBRUARY 1991 DENIS O'CONNOR HAD ASSEMBLED THE STONE, SHIPPED UP TO HIS WAIHEKE ISLAND STUDIO FROM DUNEDIN. THE LIMESTONE BLOCKS HAD ORIGINALLY FORMED PART OF THE NOW DEMOLISHED CAVERSHAM GASWORKS. OVER THE FOLLOWING MONTHS HE WORKED CARVING THE 33 PIECES THAT COMPRISE 'THE GORSE KING' BEGINNING WITH NINE METRES OF RAILWAY TRACK AND BY SEPTEMBER WORK WAS COMPLETE. OTHER ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS INCLUDE A KNEELING FIGURE, A STONE URN AND JUG, A SUNDIAL, A BEEHIVE, AND A CRUMBLING CAIRN OF FOSSILISED STONES.

¹ LETTER 16/1/90

² LETTER 21/6/89

NEIL ROBERTS, 1992
CURATOR



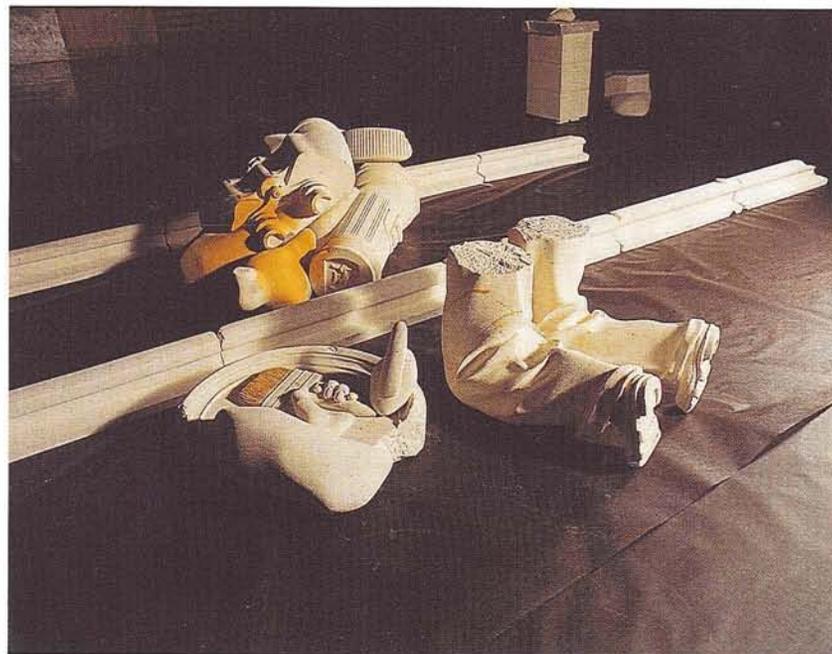
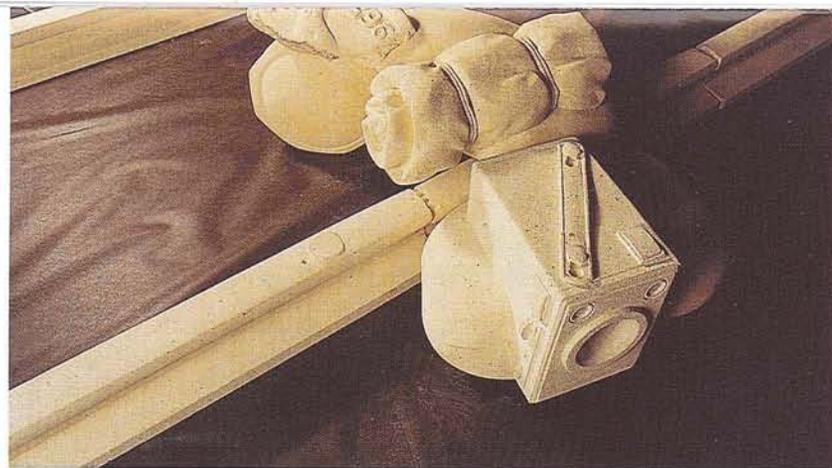
Gateway Architecture, De Chirico, the metaphysicist, did something entirely different when he positioned his framing and measuring devices on tilted planes back in the 20's. The Sleeping Bag (felt) is the alchemical poultice of Joseph Beuys revealing the healing cocoon of sleep, and the transforming power of natural materials on the human body. And when they weren't in use they lay like talismans around the house, like the big leather case of 7 x 120's hanging amidst gabardine, felt hats and suits; Or the chrome plated torch deep in the recess of a dark unused cupboard (next to an iron shoe last) that seemed to gather the light against it.

HARVESTING STONE

BEFORE I'D VENTURED INTO AN ART GALLERY OR MUSEUM, I'D WALKED BAREFOOT FOR YEARS IN MY FIRST NATURE DISTRICT. EARLY LESSONS ON THE mystery of images came from such commonplace things, as coins. They were always in the pockets. The designs on our pre-decimal currency spoke strongly to me. The huia on the sixpence was a bird said to be 'extinct' but had been real enough for me to make a perch for! The 1935 threepence was the rarest of all. Check your change. The patu and tiki (halfpenny) were a riddle in themselves, but I'd been told many times the Maori and Irish had much in common. Then one day I saw over the bed of a boyhood friend a suspended necklace of eggs. All the birds of the district and more. Even the remote hawk I used to watch circling way up nearly out of sight. Now this was a rosary for my first landscape that I could really kneel down with! A long time later, I saw that hanging line of beads again. They appeared on a painted canvas called 'Care of Small Birds, Muriwai, 1975' by an artist called C.McC. And just recently I traced a reference to this loop motif, said to have been sighted by that artist one evening out walking. Through an opened window of a house where Pacific Islanders lived, a carefully tended family shrine could be seen. Photographs and a garland of hanging plastic flowers, glowing in the artificial light. And the writer went on to caution the reader about the privacy of such things, and their relevances to works of art.

In North Otago recently I saw from a distance a perfect circle of hives. They looked for all the world like a ring of state-houses of the 1950's on a cleared subdivision. Plain, stucco boxes, no vegetation in sight except the odd gorse bush, on empty open ground. A few stones on their lids.

DENIS O'CONNOR 2-10-91



CURRICULUM VITAE
DENIS O'CONNOR

BIOGRAPHY

- 1947 BORN AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND
1966 SCHOOL OF INDUSTRIAL DESIGN, WELLINGTON
1970 ESTABLISHED A PIONEER CERAMICS WORKSHOP AT PUTIKI BAY, WAIHEKE ISLAND
1978 LIVED AND STUDIED CONTEMPORARY CERAMIC SCULPTURE IN CALIFORNIA, U.S.A.
1982 QEII ARTS COUNCIL OF NEW ZEALAND TRAVEL AWARD. STUDIED AVANT-GARDE MOVEMENT "SODEISHA" IN JAPAN AND ATTENDED BIENNALE OF SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA
1983 ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE, DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, AUCKLAND
1984 MAJOR PROJECT AWARD QEII ARTS COUNCIL OF NEW ZEALAND. ATTENDED BIENNALE OF SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA
1985 FRANCES HODGKINS FELLOWSHIP, UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO
1985- LIVED IN DUNEDIN

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- 1988 PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AWARD, QEII ARTS COUNCIL OF NEW ZEALAND. STUDIED IN U.S.A., U.K., EUROPE (SCULPTURE) WORKED IN TRADITIONAL STONEYARDS IN TUSCANY, ITALY. ATTENDED INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON SCULPTURE, TRINITY COLLEGE, DUBLIN, IRELAND. COMPLETED PUBLIC COMMISSION FOR THE WELLINGTON CITY COUNCIL
1990 PUBLIC COMMISSIONS FOR:
AUCKLAND REGIONAL AUTHORITY
AUCKLAND CITY COUNCIL
ROBT. MCDUGALL ART GALLERY, CHRISTCHURCH
MINISTRY OF JUSTICE, AUCKLAND
TRAVELLED TO AUSTRALIA

EXHIBITIONS

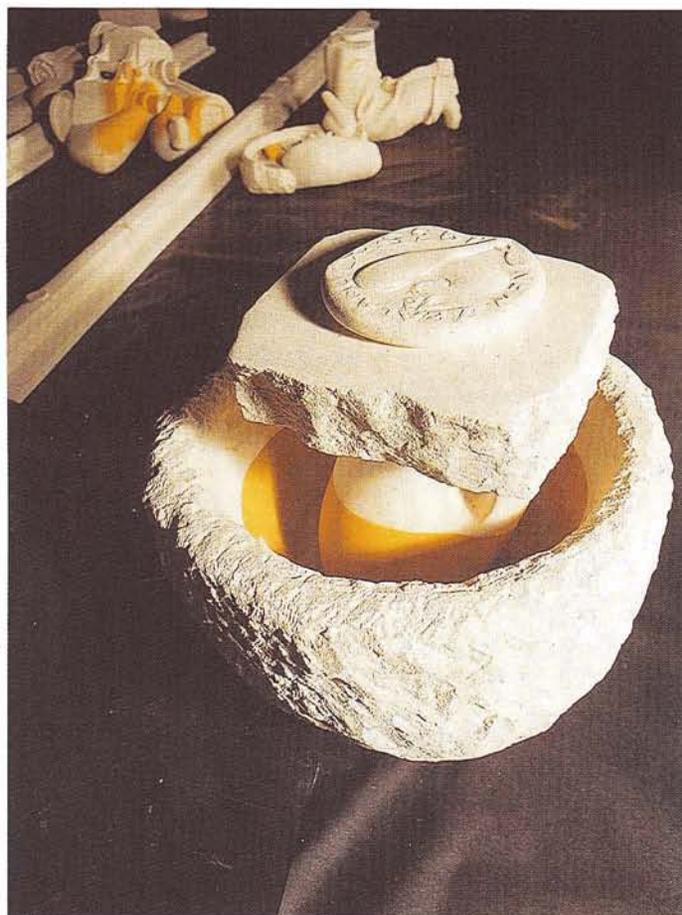
- 1969 SOLO EXHIBITION, VULCAN GALLERY, AUCKLAND
1975 "WORK IN PROGRESS", ALICAT, AUCKLAND
1976 "FOUR SALT-GLAZE POTTERS", ALICAT, AUCKLAND
1977 AUCKLAND STUDIO POTTERS, AUCKLAND INSTITUTE AND MUSEUM
1979 SOLO EXHIBITION, "PORCELAIN CERAMICS", DENIS COHN GALLERIES, AUCKLAND
"FLETCHER-BROWNBUILT AWARD EXHIBITION", AUCKLAND INSTITUTE AND MUSEUM

- 1980 "FIVE BY FIVE: CERAMIC SCULPTURE" DENIS COHN GALLERIES, AUCKLAND
"FLETCHER-BROWNBUILT AWARD, EXHIBITION", AUCKLAND INSTITUTE AND MUSEUM
1981 "NEW DIRECTIONS IN NEW ZEALAND CERAMICS", DOWSE ART MUSEUM, LOWER HUTT
WAIKATO MUSEUM OF ART AND HISTORY, HAMILTON
SOLO EXHIBITION, "NEW CERAMICS", DENIS COHN GALLERIES, AUCKLAND
1982 TRAVELLING EXHIBITION "CONTEMPORARY NEW ZEALAND TREASURES TO JAPAN" DOWSE ART MUSEUM, LOWER HUTT
1983 "NEW ZEALAND CERAMICS NOW" BISHOP SUTER ART GALLERY, NELSON
"INVITED AUCKLAND CERAMICISTS" FISHER GALLERY, PAKURANGA ARTS CENTRE, MANUKAU
1984 SOLO EXHIBITION "SONGS OF THE GULF" AUCKLAND CITY ART GALLERY
SHOP WINDOW INSTALLATION "THE MEASURE OF OPINION" AUCKLAND
1985 SOLO EXHIBITION "SONGS OF THE GULF" DOWSE ART MUSEUM, LOWER HUTT
TREASURES FROM THE LAND" TOUR OF U.S.A. CURATED AND ORGANISED BY THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTE, WASHINGTON
"FOUR ARTISTS" BOSSHARD GALLERIES, DUNEDIN
1986 SOLO EXHIBITION "BRANCHES FROM THE WISHING TREE" DUNEDIN PUBLIC ART GALLERY, DOWSE ART MUSEUM, LOWER HUTT AND GOVETT-BREWSTER ART GALLERY, NEW PLYMOUTH
"NEW ACQUISITIONS: ELEVEN DRAWINGS" HOCKEN LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO, DUNEDIN
"ASPECTS OF RECENT NZ ART: SCULPTURE 2" AUCKLAND CITY ART GALLERY
1987 "FOUR CERAMIC SCULPTORS" DOWSE ART MUSEUM, LOWER HUTT
"WHAKATIPUA LINTEL" BEAVEN HOUSE, OTAGO (COMMISSION)
1988 "NZXI" AUCKLAND CITY ART GALLERY
ART GALLERY OF N.S.W. SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA
MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, BRISBANE (THE BIRDMAN AND THE ENGINEER)
"THE INNOCENT EYE" DOWSE ART MUSEUM, LOWER HUTT
PUBLIC ART-BONUS ART, WELLINGTON CITY ART GALLERY (MOTE PARK) DOCUMENTATION
1989 "HE KOKANGA", AUCKLAND CITY ART GALLERY (SELECTED BY KURA REWIRI-THORSEN

- "MOTE PARK", SCULPTURE COMMISSION, WELLINGTON CITY COUNCIL
SOLO EXHIBITION "BOTH ARMS" GOW LANGSFORD GALLERY, AUCKLAND
"THE LIMELIGHT CARVINGS" ATHFIELD HOUSE, QUEENSTOWN, OTAGO
(SCULPTURE COMMISSION)
1990 "70 XX 90", THE GOVETT BREWSTER ART GALLERY COLLECTION, TWENTY YEARS
"MY THREE ARMS", ACQUISITION REVIEW, AUCKLAND CITY ART GALLERY
(SCULPTURE COMMISSION) AUCKLAND REGIONAL AUTHORITY HEADQUARTERS, AUCKLAND, "HOOK, LINE AND SINKER" AOTEA CARTOUCHE (SCULPTURE COMMISSION), AUCKLAND CITY COUNCIL
ART AND ORGANISED LABOUR IN NZ, WELLINGTON CITY ART GALLERY (TOURING)
"THEATRE OF DUST", ROTORUA ART & HISTORY MUSEUM
HERE AND NOW, 15 CONTEMPORARY NZ SCULPTORS
1991 "THE GORSE KING", (COMMISSION INSTALLATION), ROBERT MCDUGALL ART GALLERY, CHRISTCHURCH
HIGH COURT TRIPTYCH, JUSTICE DEPT AUCKLAND (COMMISSION)
CATHOLIC TASTE, GEORGE FRASER GALLERY, AUCKLAND

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

- RIJKSMUSEUM KROLLER-MULLER, NETHERLANDS
ROYAL SCOTTISH MUSEUM, EDINBURGH
NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA, MELBOURNE
AUSTRALIA COUNCIL, SYDNEY
AUCKLAND CITY ART GALLERY
AUCKLAND MUSEUM AND INSTITUTE
DOWSE ART MUSEUM, LOWER HUTT
MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, WELLINGTON
DUNEDIN PUBLIC ART GALLERY
HOCKEN LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO
GOVETT-BREWSTER ART GALLERY, NEW PLYMOUTH
WAIKATO MUSEUM OF ART AND HISTORY, HAMILTON
AUCKLAND REGIONAL AUTHORITY
WELLINGTON CITY COUNCIL
AUCKLAND AOTEA CENTRE
MINISTRY OF JUSTICE, HIGH COURT, AUCKLAND
ROBERT MCDUGALL ART GALLERY, CHRISTCHURCH



ALL PHOTOGRAPHS DETAILS OF
THE GORSE KING
MAHENO LIMESTONE, YELLOW OCHRE LIMEWASH
14,000MM X 5,000MM 1991



The Robert McDougall Art Gallery
Christchurch City Council
New Zealand

HOUSE OF STONE, HOUSE OF LAUGHTER

the stones that can only be counted on two hands
the stones that fell on me in a dream
the stone that led a double-life as a birdcall
the stones that hold the days heat
if the stone blushes, it's likely to be sedimentary and needs to be put in water
the stone on my tongue to enhance language
the stone that shattered my windscreen
seven stones buried in the garden, to be rid of seven warts
Hailstones, The Collecting and Carving of, A Sculptor's Guide
the stone that healed the sick with it's shadow
the stone that would not stay in Richard Long's line
the stone flooded with phosphorescence that was once a canoe anchor, but is now asleep in a glass case
the stone up in the Ranges with 'Jesus Saves' sprayed on it
beehivestones, beestingstones
the three stones I kneel on, one for each knee
the stones that the wind brings with it the stones that the breath brings with it
the stone I put on the railway track but took off again

Dust-Cloths, Quarry-cloths (a glossary of dressed stone)

Polished	gaberdine	oilskin	corduroy	worsted
	tapa	scrim	serge	flannel
	tweed	felt	drill	poplin
Unpolished	tulle	sateen	shantung	voile
	organzine	batiste	moire	damask
	brocade	lamé	armure	pongee

the stone C.McCahon threw at Moby Dick from the cliffs above Muriwai
all the stones in all the fruit in all the orchards lying beneath the lake of the hydro-dam
the stone at the corner of a square form that allows for a circular form to evolve above it (squinch)
the scar from my Father's gallstone operation
remove the burning stones from the flames and allow to cool, when they are warm enough to handle, place them
where most comfortable around your body. You will sleep at ease.

Lapidary Remedies (to be placed in pairs over the eyes)

Soft	Scoria	helps identify the source of pain
	Pumice	allows a continuous flow of cleansing tears
	Chalk	assists any crossing into unknown territories
Hard	Obsidian	enhances the mystery of your Mother and Father
	Granite	acceptance of opposing points of view
	Basalt	instructs on procedure for action and direction

First published in a shorter form for an exhibition at the George Fraser Gallery, Artspace, Auckland. June, 1991.