



Trail blazers

A new sculpture park provides seed funding to help top flight sculptors achieve ambitious works. Dan Chappell and photographer Gil Hanly walk the trail.

Art and wine... somehow the two are becoming inseparable, and increasingly New Zealand wineries are incorporating art galleries or sculpture gardens in their vineyards to give visitors something to admire while savouring the latest vintage. Seresin in Marlborough has its giant Chris Booth sculpture, Black Barn in Hawkes Bay its own gallery and Paul Dibble sculptures, and Woollaston Estate in Nelson displays works by Neil Dawson, Marte Szirmay, Bill Culbert and several others.

But at Matakana, north of Auckland, Richard and Christine Didsbury, the owners of Brick Bay Vineyard, have lifted the bar with the opening in January 2007 of the Brick Bay Sculpture Trail.

Long-time collectors and enthusiastic patrons of the arts, the Didsburys recall they "have always collected sculpture". Twenty years ago they purchased the coastal property with breathtaking views of the Mahurangi Harbour and adjacent Kawau Island, building their striking Noel Lane-designed home, and establishing the highly regarded Brick Bay Vineyard ten vintages ago.

Christine Didsbury recalls how the freedom of the rural space gave the

impetus to the development of the trail. "Suddenly we had a larger palette to work with and we could go beyond the confines of gallery-sized works for our collection. We'd put in works by Chris Booth, Phil Dadson and others, but the turning point came with the large *Koru* earthwork we had installed by Virginia King."

Inspired by the works in Charles Jencks' *Garden of Cosmic Speculation* in Scotland, King's giant koru whorl is gently sculpted in the farmland and clearly visible on Google Earth. Suddenly the Didsburys were faced with the dilemma of wanting to share their art but also retain their own privacy.

"It was a visit to Goodwood Sculpture Park in Sussex that confirmed the concept for the trail, especially as around the same time we were able to purchase a neighbouring block. This allowed the creation of a separate access road, a lake, adjoining gallery and cellar-door facilities – and the trail could wind through the native bush and adjacent farmland," recalls Richard.

The Goodwood Sculpture Park is a major showcase of British sculpture, with up to 70 large-scale works displayed throughout a 24-acre ancient woodland park on the Sussex Downs. The park attracts sculptors of the calibre of Antony Gormley, Zadok Ben-David, Nigel Hall and Tony Cragg. It's administered by a trust, and all works are for sale, providing funding for new commissions. The Didsburys had found their template.



Christine and Richard Didsbury

Opposite page: *Water Lilies*, 2006, corrugated iron, Jeff Thomson

Top right: *Sliver*, 2006, marine-grade stainless steel, Virginia King

Bottom right: *Two Tangles Touching*, 2006, flexlock hose, Pauline Rhodes

Aware that many artists don't create large works because of the high cost and limited opportunities for display and sale, the Didsburys have created a trust that artists can apply to for funding. Successful applicants have their completed works installed on the trail and these works are for sale.

"Many artists, including those in mid-career, are financially limited when it comes to creating large-scale, fully resolved, and professionally finished works that would attract large corporate, public or international buyers," says Lisa Hannan, arts manager for Brick Bay Sculpture Trail. "The artists we've assisted are grateful for the help. They've embraced the concept of the trail – creating works that sit comfortably in the bush, pasture or wetlands but are not necessarily site-specific, given that they will all, we hope, find new homes elsewhere.

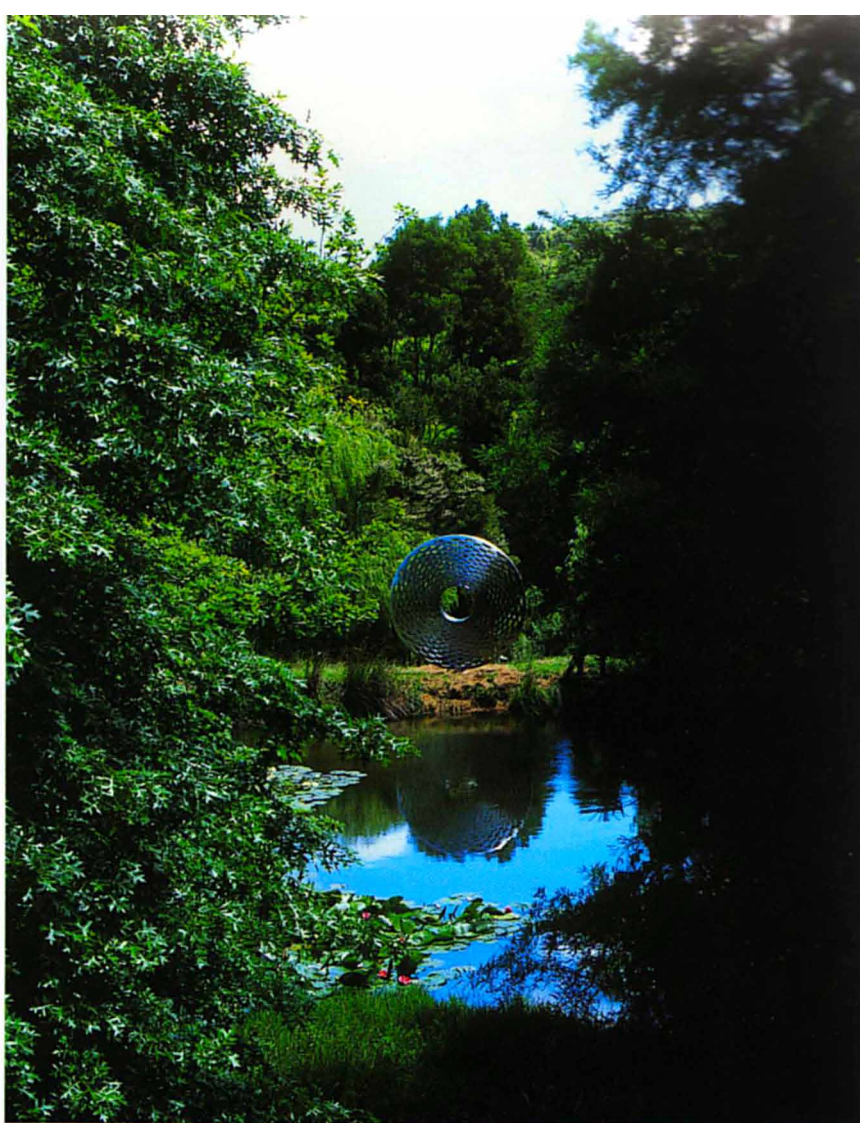
"We see ourselves as complementary to the artists' dealer galleries and we have chosen works that we hope will challenge artists to extend their practice and create art that would be very difficult to display in a gallery situation."

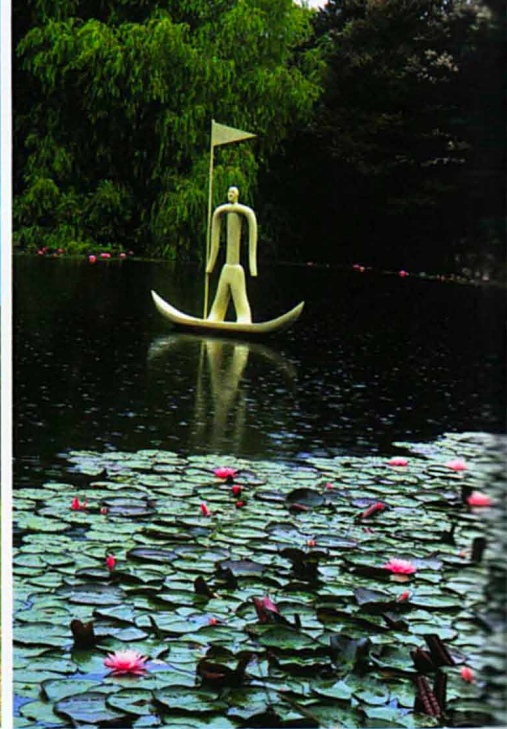
Over the past 12 months the concept has become reality. The Noel Lane-designed gallery, resource centre and tasting facility hovers over the first lake – a giant glasshouse with luminescent green, white and orange cubes glowing from within. Since October over 30 artworks have been installed along the 2km trail that winds past the lake and wetlands, through the adjacent farmland and into the native bush where ferns, kahikatea, rimu, nikau groves and creepers thrive.

The Didsbury's daughter Anna is in charge of the placement, trail construction and management of the park. The inaugural 32 sculptures were chosen by a curatorial panel comprising architect Noel Lane, art lecturer Dr Robin Woodward, curator Lara Strongman and Christine and Richard Didsbury. As existing works in the park sell, new faces, including Artspace director Brian Butler and artist Tessa Laird, will join the curatorial team to select new works.

At the trailhead, *Rauwai*, a Robert Jahnke sculpture lurks, taniwha-like in a lake, and giant Richard Wedekind figures stand sentinel on the hillside. The path then loops back through a series of outdoor 'rooms' adjacent to the entry, where smaller works will be for sale. Then it heads through bush and pasture to another lake, where, at one end, a Barry Lett sculpture of a sailor rocks precariously on his sickle-like craft. At the other end of the lake, *Water Lilies*, a pirouetting ensemble of Jeff Thomson sculptures swings gently in the breeze.

Throughout the trail, there are tantalising glimpses of the works ahead – Leon van den Eijkel's slowly revolving blue *Kynic Tree*, Phil Price's lazily undulating *Quattro* and Virginia King's splendid orb, *Sliver*, reflected in the still water of a nearby pond.





As the path twists and turns in and out of the bush, more intimate works are revealed. Phil Neary's *Buddha Bell* nestles contemplatively in a fern-filled glade and Jim Wheeler's delicate *Epiphyte* mimics its natural counterpart – almost invisible in the surrounding trees. At the furthest point on the trail Gregor Kregar's impressive *Polyhedron Dwelling 2* squats, like some mutant transformer toy, randomly reflecting sky, trees, and passers-by in a kaleidoscopic whirl.

The return trail winds through the bush and here you can see Pauline Rhodes' *Two Tangles Touching*, a sinuous slither of steel, glinting in the supplejack. Brick maestro Peter Lange's *Last Man Down* towers over the path, evoking memories of the homeless chimneys that dot the countryside, mute witnesses to our passing.

The confirmation of the Didsbury's vision becomes apparent when the artists are spoken to. Phil Price's works have become highly visible in the public sculpture realm, with works in the Viaduct Harbour, Lambton Quay, and most recently, his sculpture *Nucleus*, which was made for the SCAPE Biennial in Christchurch,

was chosen as that city's latest permanent artwork. He says the Brick Bay trail provides a perfect location to showcase big works.

"Art is a wonderfully high risk business and faint-hearts need not apply. But often the problem is getting the client to visualise the real thing – that leap of faith between the sketches, maquette and the finished work. Until now, we artists have had a culture of exhibiting in galleries. Now we have a new forum for outdoor work, where people can come and look for the extraordinary and to be challenged. This place has certainly been set up to achieve that."

Auckland-based sculptor Richard Mathieson is equally enthusiastic. Like many of the participating artists he applied for funding via the trust.

"The funding allowed me to make a three-piece sculpture for the trail. Without it I would only have been able to make a single work. The chance to leave the work on site for up to two years is also a huge attraction. That allows it to settle into the landscape – something that is hard to achieve



Installations in progress at Brick Bay Sculpture Trail. Left to right: Virginia King; Leon van den Eijkel; Phil Price, Terry Stringer



Opposite page (left to right): *Last Man Down*, 2006, brick, Peter Lange; *Conversation Piece*, 2006, Corten steel, Richard Wedekind; *Sail Away*, 2006, polychromed fibreglass, Barry Lett

Left: *Buddha Bell*, 2006, Port Oxford cedar, bronze, stainless steel, Phil Neary

with many of the other outdoor sculpture events." A similar affirmation comes from Leon van den Eijkel, who bluntly states, "My *Urban Trees* are not cheap to make and there's no way I could put up all the money myself. This way, if the work sells, the funding goes straight back to the trust, but I'm in a far better position to build another work to replace it. The winery and the beautiful setting will attract a good range of buyers."

Over the past ten years public interest in outdoor sculpture has mushroomed and the number of sculpture events confirms this. Last year *Sculpture on Shore* raised over \$300,000 for Women's Refuges, attracting over 17,000 visitors, and Waiheke's *Sculpture on the Gulf* and Wellington's *Shapeshifter* are equally popular events.

Private sculpture parks are also becoming must-see destinations for art-lovers. Terry Stringer's Zealandia (also at Mahurangi), Waitakaruru Sculpture Park (near Hamilton) and Connell's Bay Sculpture Park (on Waiheke Island) are all open to the public.

Ultimately it will be the artists who dictate the long-term success of ventures like Brick Bay. There's

no disputing that providing seed funding for sculptors is laudable. Equally important will be the preparedness of our top sculptors to create works that will attract international buyers.

The Didsburys make no bones about the fact they will target international as well as domestic clients. To date few New Zealand sculptors have accessed the international market. Think Chris Booth, Bill Culbert, Neil Dawson, Kon Dimopoulos, Jeff Thomson, Virginia King and Phil Price. It's definitely not a long list... yet.

The Brick Bay concept is based on a proven international model and is being driven by an enthusiastic, committed and commercially astute team. The participating artists seem equally convinced the trail will attract those often elusive buyers, both local and overseas. So the scene is set and the long-term potential of the venture will be watched with great interest.

/Dan Chappell

Brick Bay Sculpture Trail is open seven days from 10am to 5pm. It's located on Arabella Lane, RD2 Warkworth. Phone 09 425 4690 or visit www.brickbaysculpture.co.nz

All photos: Gill Hanly



Left to right: installations in progress - Gregor Kregar, Phil Price, Virginia King, Leon van den Eijkel