



Warren Viscoe & Christine Hellyar

Transversing in Wood, Bronze & Lead

PETER SIMPSON

'Transversing' is an uncommon locution, the present participle of a word more commonly used in noun, adjectival or adverbial form. But, in its rare and obsolete senses of crossing or intersecting, of turning upside down and of transforming or transmuting, it nevertheless lends itself aptly enough to the relationship between Warren Viscoe and Christine Hellyar, the two sculptors whose work was shown together under this title at Auckland's Artis Gallery in November-December 2011, and to some extent to the work exhibited, which in both cases involves transformational processes. Although Hellyar is the younger by more than a decade, both artists

are graduates of Elam during the years that Colin McCahon was an influential teacher there (1964-70). Both, though long-term residents of Auckland, have roots in provincial New Zealand which have had a lasting impact on their practice (Hellyar in Taranaki, Viscoe in Northland), and both have had distinguished careers as sculptors extending over several decades. Exhibiting together was the idea of the artists themselves; they are friends.

There are eight works in Viscoe's portion of the exhibition, five of which are wall-hung wooden 'coats', while the other three are more orthodoxly three-dimensional sculptures on plinths, the latter all taking the form of simple wooden barn-like 'houses' made from dark-stained macrocarpa, but varied according to what is placed between the top and the bottom.

In *The Transfiguration of Richard Henry* it is the prone figure of a kakapo lying on its side which lies sandwiched between roof and floor. Carved from kauri with the directness, humour and appeal

(above) WARREN VISCOE *The Transfiguration of Richard Henry* 2011
Kauri, 250 x 530 x 165 mm.

(left) WARREN VISCOE *I Built a Hide for Wetas* 2011
Privet and guava, 320 x 430 x 150 mm.

(opposite above) WARREN VISCOE *Walden Pond* 2011
Macrocarpa, 530 x 1100 x 70 mm.

(opposite centre) WARREN VISCOE *Avoirdupois* 2011
Macrocarpa & lead, 460 x 750 x 150 mm.

(opposite below) WARREN VISCOE *Carnivore* 2011
Macrocarpa & guava, 390 x 1180 x 140 mm.



of folk art, Viscoe's kakapo honours the pioneer conservationist named in the title who heroically (but in the end futilely) tried to protect the clumsy flightless parrots from their imported predators by transporting live birds to Resolution Island in Fiordland, anticipating by decades techniques that later conservationists have perfected.¹

In the House of Virgil has a sumptuously coloured slab of golden beeswax occupying the centre space, evoking the account of bees in the fourth book of the *Georgics* by the Roman poet Virgil which celebrates 'the celestial gift of honey from the air'. In *I Build a Hide for Wetas* the middle portion consists of a dense forest made from small branches of guava and privet. All three of these simple but satisfyingly coherent works register the impulse to preserve and protect indigenous natural creatures such as birds and insects by contriving 'shelters from the storm'.

Viscoe's 'coats of bark'—the five wall-hung pieces—have several elements in common. All five are short coats constructed from single slabs of dark-stained macrocarpa; all are broadly similar in size—roughly a metre wide and a half-metre high, and between five and 15 centimetres deep; the depicted garments are roughly life-sized, in other words. Unlike Tom Kreisler's noteworthy series of paintings of overcoats from the 1970s to which they allude, Viscoe's coats do not hang limply from a single nail on the wall, but are shown front-side out, more in the manner of a possum skin nailed to a board for drying. In this aspect (though not in others) they are reminiscent of Jim Dine's paintings of variously coloured full-frontal bath robes—another artistic antecedent, though too remote to be considered an influence. In some Viscoe works (such as *Carnivore* and *Ammonite*) the two sides of the coat are held open by an armature of sticks, rather in the manner of a taxidermist preparing a creature for display, whereas in others the central space between the lapels is bare and oval shaped. Apart from minor variations in size—disposition of the collars, lapels and sleeves, preserved irregularities (knots, holes) in the source material and the presence or absence of internal armature—what most distinguishes one coat from another is what is held in the capacious pockets.

In *The Stick Collector* it is bundles of random sticks like beach flotsam; in *Ammonite* a large spiral fossil as named in the title; in *Carnivore* one pocket contains a bundle of bones, the other a leaping dog, teeth bared; in *Avoirdupois* it is bits of lead, other pieces being attached elsewhere to or lining the garment; finally, in *Walden Pond* (the reference is to the 1854 book *Walden or Life in the Woods* by the American naturalist and philosopher Henry David Thoreau), there are no pockets but the surface of the coat is 'sprouting edible leaves' (as Viscoe's gallery note puts it).² Each garment has its own story to tell, about the basic conditions of existence, its struggles and burdens, its pleasures and perils, its subjugation to time and gravity. As those familiar with Viscoe's oeuvre will know, this idiosyncratic artist has a philosophical cast of mind and his coats are gentle allegories of aspects



of the human condition, as revealed in garments that, like a human version of bark, are a sort of second skin. In the sculptor's own words: 'The wooden coats presented here journey with their invisible wearers on gravel roads and forage the dusty verges. The prominent pockets gather the desirable and the undesirable.'³

Christine Hellyar's *Bush Birds* is also a combination of wall-mounted (three) and plinth-mounted (eight) pieces. The more numerous plinth-mounted pieces consist of three separate elements. A cast bronze 'bird' sits upon a leaf, also cast, usually in bronze but sometimes in aluminium, and these in turn rest



on a smooth cylindrical totara plinth with a domed top. There is a pleasing contrast in colour, materials, and form between the three elements. The pieces are not large, the three-in-one combinations varying in height between 25 and 48 centimetres. The two-piece wall works—without the totara plinths—are even smaller; *Floating Bush Bird II* (in which the leaf is cast in lead) has dimensions of only 11 x 16 centimetres. Like the leaves (of kawakawa, whau, rangiora and the large-leaved fern maratata—all broad-leaved native species) and the plinths on which they perch, the bush birds also have their origins in vegetable matter. The bronzes have been cast from bits of bush detritus (for example, pine cones or pieces of ponga trunk) picked





up on beaches or from the forest floor and cleverly modified by the artist to more closely resemble birds, notably by the addition (after casting) of tiny red beads for eyes. These bush birds are imaginary creatures, not attempts to replicate actual species, and are the artist's way (according to a gallery note) 'of addressing the shortfall in New Zealand's biota'.⁴

The gallery note also includes a suggestion that Hellyar's creatures are connected to the 'patupaiarehe' of Maori legend, 'the fairy-like beings who live in forests and lure people away from safety with the music of their flutes'.⁵ The Waitakere Ranges, an area special to Hellyar, is one of the places associated with such creatures. Whether or not we take this



(opposite above) CHRISTINE HELLYAR *Bush Bird II* 2011
Cast bronze & lead, 110 x 160 mm.

(opposite below left) CHRISTINE HELLYAR *Bush Bird XI* 2011
Cast bronze & totara, 350 x 320 x 280 mm.

(opposite below right) CHRISTINE HELLYAR *Bush Bird V* 2011
Cast bronze & totara, 250 x 210 x 190 mm.

(right) CHRISTINE HELLYAR *Floating Bush Bird III* 2011
Cast bronze, 140 x 130 mm.

(below) CHRISTINE HELLYAR *Bush Bird VII* 2011
Cast bronze, aluminium & totara 260 x 330 x 160 mm.

suggestion on board, Hellyar's creatures are notable for their delicacy, grace, oddity and slightly wacky humour. They are endearing creatures more apt to raise a smile than deep reflection on their significance. *Bush Bird III*, for example, has a comically elongated neck attached to its squat and compact body. *Bush Bird VII* is a pert and tiny creature somewhat like a robin or grey warbler, perched insouciantly on a stump. *Bush Bird X* has an awkward, crane-like elevation of form. All the pieces on totara plinths are dark in colour, sometimes in contrast with the leaves on which they sit. The wall pieces, however, have a greenish patina and the leaves, two of which are cast in lead (*Floating Bush Bird I* and *II*), are silvery in colour.

In the context of both Viscoe's and Hellyar's total oeuvre, the work in *Transversing* is in minor mode by comparison with their best known efforts, such as Viscoe's giant figures and assemblages and Hellyar's trays, cupboards, installations and latex hangings. There is a definite feel-good aspect to both these mini-exhibitions, dedicated as they are to the gods of small things. They are companionable pieces, beautifully crafted in both cases, which sit well together and in the company of the other artist's work.



1. For Richard Henry, see Derek Grzelewski, 'A tale of two Henries', *New Zealand Geographic* 56, March-April 2002, pp. 34-37.
2. Warren Viscoe, 'Coats of Bark', gallery note, Artis Gallery, 2011.
3. *ibid.*
4. Christine Hellyar, 'Bush Birds', gallery note, Artis Gallery, 2011
5. *ibid.*

