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Christine Hellyar
Kura Te Waru Rewiri
Richard Orjis / Wayne Barrar
Gareth Watkins / Dan Arps
J. Elder Moultray (1865-1922)
Wellington's *The Obstinate Object*
Palmerston North's *Now & Then*
Thermostat Gallery
Two Takes on Post-quake Christchurch

Four Decades On

A Conversation with Christine Hellyar

There is a remarkable consistency about Christine Hellyar's art career. Since attending the Elam School of Fine Arts from 1966-69, Hellyar has steadily produced and exhibited sculptural works, without any perceivable lull or drying up of inspiration. Moreover, her work seems never to have fallen from critical or curatorial favour. Negative reviews of the exhibitions are scarce, and Hellyar has been included in such significant shows as the Sydney Biennale (1982), *NZ XI* (1988), *Headlands* (1992) and *Unruly Practices* (1993). For me, the most striking qualities of her work have been simple but sumptuous colour and droll humour (weird latex agglomerations, titles such as *Nice Weapons*). These qualities endure in Hellyar's latest sculptures.

Edward Hanfling: You have recently had two exhibitions in Auckland: At Artis Gallery you showed *Bush Birds*—individual sculptures in bronze and other materials—and at the Gus Fisher Gallery, *Hutton and Cotton*—an installation. In your opinion, is installation quite a different discipline to sculpture?

Christine Hellyar: Well, they have lots of things in common, in terms of inspiration, playfulness, poetry and identity. They both come from the same source. My very first show was of landscapes, which were very flat objects. Those flat objects sort of shrank into small objects, and spread out as well—they went in two directions, and you can see how that ended up as these two separate things. To me, they're not entirely separate, but I can see they're separate in other people's eyes.

E.H.: So installation goes back a long way in your work, doesn't it?

C.H.: It goes back to 1972 and the *Country Clothesline*.

E.H.: That was one of the most controversial works in New Zealand art history. A banner was put up outside the gallery in New Plymouth which said: 'Govett-Brewster Lunatic Asylum'. *Why* was that work so controversial?

C.H.: It was because I had left New Plymouth, when I went to Elam, and here I was looking back at Taranaki. It was inspired by driving past Taranaki farms. As soon as people went out of New Plymouth, they would see my country clothesline. It made them look

at the landscape differently, and it annoyed them that here I was, as they thought, criticising them. I thought I was celebrating a connection between the landscape and the people *on* the landscape. That's why all the stuff was green, and why it billowed in the wind. But I think the main thing was: 'how dare you!' The editor of the newspaper, who condemned the clothesline, was actually a friend I used to go tramping with! I think they were annoyed with the art gallery as well as me, because they thought this group of people felt they were superior to the rest of New Plymouth.

E.H.: So the controversy was specific to that context. You didn't get similar reactions elsewhere?

C.H.: No. I had shown the work initially in Masterton at the Hansells sculpture competition. People liked it there, people liked it in Auckland, and an American visitor wanted to buy it and take it back to America, but her husband didn't want her to! And people remember it. I often get people—total strangers in Taranaki—say 'oh, you're the clothesline person'! The very first 'Country Clothesline' was that wonderful William Hodges painting, *A View in Pickersgill Harbour, Dusky Bay, New Zealand* [1773]. There's a lovely little clothesline in the background—the sailors hanging washing out in the middle of the bush.

E.H.: Were you aware of that when you did your clothesline?

C.H.: Not at the time, no.

E.H.: A later notable installation was the one in the 'Dome' of Whanganui's Sarjeant Gallery in 1988.

(opposite) Christine Hellyar, Auckland 2011
(Photograph: Donald Ensor)

(above) CHRISTINE HELLYAR *Country Clothesline* 1972
Cloth & latex, dimensions variable
(Collection of Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth)

(right) CHRISTINE HELLYAR *Hodges Waterfalls* 2005
Silk, wool & cotton, 2000 x 4000 mm.

C.H.: That's probably my most quiet work, and it was incredibly difficult to photograph. I've got no good images of it. It was about the architecture and the lighting. I still think the Sarjeant has the most beautiful lighting of any gallery in New Zealand.

E.H.: There are certain trademark motifs in your Gus Fisher installation—the cupboards, hanging fabrics or materials, the botanical specimens. Why do you think you keep coming back to those kinds of forms and subjects?

(opposite above) CHRISTINE HELLYAR & MAUREEN LANDER *Mrs Cook's Kete*—detail 2003
Hibiscus, flax, paper

(opposite below) CHRISTINE HELLYAR *Clutch Brood & Echo* 1990
Clay, bronze, plaster & fibre, 3000 x 2200 mm.
(Collection of Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand)

(right)
CHRISTINE HELLYAR *Mrs Cook's Kete - Thought Trays*—detail 2003
Silk, wood, hibiscus & feathers.
(Collection of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki)

C.H.: Well, you want to do better. You want to improve on the past, rather than reinvent the wheel. And I think you have to be true to your passion. It's what I'm interested in. Because I'm interested in poetry, I like the idea of writing short poems, but I also like the idea that possibly there's a saga out there that I haven't tapped into entirely yet. You want things to have more resonance and complexity, without being foolishly entangled or bizarre.

E.H.: The title of the Artis show, *Bush Birds*, seems to relate to lists of words you have compiled, and which have sometimes accompanied your exhibitions — phrases like 'Moth Rocks with Roots', 'Birds for New Brides', 'Mauls with Leather Cauls' . . .

C.H.: Oh yes, names are important to me. I've always written lists—I've got books of lists. If you read the words, they're not just descriptive, they're playing with words and ideas as well. Sometimes I find that people don't actually read the words. Te Papa owns *Clutch, Brood and Echo*, and, you know, 'clutch', 'brood' and 'echo' are not nice things. But some people just think, 'oh, feminism!'

E.H.: Now, the obvious question is about museums. Not only have you made work *about* museums—like the Gus Fisher show—but you've made work *in* museums. We were both involved in a show at the Whanganui Museum in 2003, *Infiltrations*, and you also exhibited at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, England with Maureen Lander. What is it about museums that fascinates you?

C.H.: I'm very proud of the Pitt Rivers show. That was a high-point in my life. People were so open-minded there. We were allowed to do absolutely anything we wanted. We wanted to put stuff all through the museum—the first two floors, because we weren't interested in the third floor, which was weapons. The viewpoint we were trying to put across was that, if a New Zealand woman, or a Maori woman, was putting together the Cook Collection, it would have been a different bunch of things.

We were also looking at the way the collections were encased in glass, opening that up a bit. Why do I love museums? I suppose because they say so much. The things speak for themselves—speak of the past. And I love research, finding out how people used to think, still think, why they do things.

When I left New Plymouth, there wasn't an art gallery there, only a museum, and the power of the objects in the Taranaki Museum is extraordinary. Taranaki Maori art is fantastic. There were pioneer things too, like one plum sitting in a jar that had been preserved for over a hundred years. Time is important to me. That's partly why Maori culture has appealed to me, because it's happened over a long period of time. And that's why I've had to go to Europe to find older things.

E.H.: To what extent do you think your work celebrates museums, and to what extent could it be seen as critical?

C.H.: That's a very good question. It's both, isn't it? I actually do voluntary work at the Auckland Museum, and I love working with the people there, in Ethnology. It upsets me when people don't see that I love museums as well as maybe being critical of them. Of course, one can be critical of old museums much more easily than current ones. The only time I've been over to Adelaide, for instance, they still had *mokomokai* out, and the same in Bristol, and the British Museum years ago—just sensitivity stuff.

E.H.: Is there a danger that in adopting systems of display used by museums, and systems of classification, you could be tainting your art with the negative, limiting associations and effects of those systems? Couldn't it reaffirm the hierarchies of the traditional museum?

C.H.: Absolutely. The minute you start talking about something, you're reaffirming it. It doesn't matter how critical you are of it. But the only actual museum cabinets I've used are the ones from the McGregor Museum that were in the Gus Fisher work, and I've used them once before, at Milford Gallery. Normally I use domestic cabinets—because domestic spaces

are museums as well—to override that, and to give another lead-in.

E.H.: What do you think of Te Papa?

C.H.: I think a lot of people really miss the whole historical collection, which used to be very available in the old building. You'd go to Wellington, and rush up to Buckle Street, and it would be like warming yourself at a fire. It helped you feel it was OK to be an artist. But it's good that they've got lots of money. I've been to a couple of conferences there that were excellent. There are a lot of fantastic people who work there. I'm not sure about the building. No matter how much the architect wanted it to belong in that place, the fact is, it doesn't.

E.H.: You left Taranaki to study at Elam in 1966. What did you feel was the most important thing you learnt there, or the most significant experience?

C.H.: McCahon was important. The library was really important—fantastic library. For me, it was just such a joy to be there, because I wasn't allowed to do art at school. In my final year, because I'd worked out that I wanted to go to Elam, I was allowed to drop Chemistry and do art—but not with a teacher, just at a table at the back of the classroom. I'd always drawn and, because I did sciences, I think it helped make me an acute observer. When I got to art school, I was probably better at drawing than most people who went through with me. I still love drawing. I couldn't paint when I got to art school. I knew nothing of sculpture whatsoever, except picking up a piece of pumice on the beach and chopping it up. At Elam, it was absolutely wonderful to me that there were people talking about art, and doing things that I didn't understand. Growing up in Taranaki, we did have Don Driver and Michael Smither. I used to talk to Don in Tingey's art shop after school on Friday night, and he was always a great friend and supporter, and an important influence on me.

E.H.: Many of your early sculptures were made of latex, which was an unusual material to use at that time. How did you come to use latex?

C.H.: When I was a student, Bob Ellis gave us a project where we had to make something in which touch was the dominant aspect. Most people—almost everybody—made something out of metal, so you could stroke it and it was nice and smooth. I wanted something you could poke. I found out about a latex glove manufacturer in Papakura, and drove out and got some latex and made some works from it. When I went to Christchurch, to Teachers' College, in the 1970s, latex was incredibly cheap from Skellerup, so that's when I started making seaweedy things.

E.H.: The American Lynda Benglis used latex for her floor pieces? Were you aware of her work?

C.H.: No. Louise Bourgeois used latex, and so did Eva Hesse. I discovered Bourgeois when I was researching my fourth year dissertation, which was on something called 'landscape sculpture'. Hesse I didn't discover until later.

E.H.: What do you think are the most notable changes in your work over the course of your career?

C.H.: Well, I'm not that keen on smelly things any longer! I love latex, but I've had to flag it away,

(opposite above) CHRISTINE HELLYAR *Flotsam and Jetsum* 1970
Cloth & latex, 2500 x 1250 mm.

(opposite below)
CHRISTINE HELLYAR *White China Clay Cabinet* 1987
Wood, clay & wool, 1500 x 2500 mm.
(Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu)

(right) CHRISTINE HELLYAR *Situation Photo* 1969
Analogue photograph, 300 x 300 mm.

(below) CHRISTINE HELLYAR *People and the Land* 1983
Wood, clay & wool, dimensions variable
(Collection of Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand)

because it does horrible things to me; I seem to have become allergic to it. Also, I finally recognised that you can't make things out of latex and expect them to survive. And you can't combine latex and metal, which is a great shame, as they go really well together. I've become more obsessed by history, as time's gone by, as I've got older. And I'm more obsessed by research, because I've got more time to do it, now that I'm not teaching.

E.H.: You haven't, that I'm aware, ever branched out into digital media, or film, which is where some aspects of contemporary sculpture have gone.

C.H.: No. I *do* do photographs. When I was a student, I did these photographs of objects in landscape settings, which were important to me at the time, and which Priscilla Pitts showed in *Unquiet Earth*, which was part of the *Headlands* exhibition in 1992. They were done in my own neighbourhood, up the mountain, at the beach, the bush. I would put objects in a space, then take them out again, learning something about the space from putting an object there. They were influenced by Robert Smithson. Jim

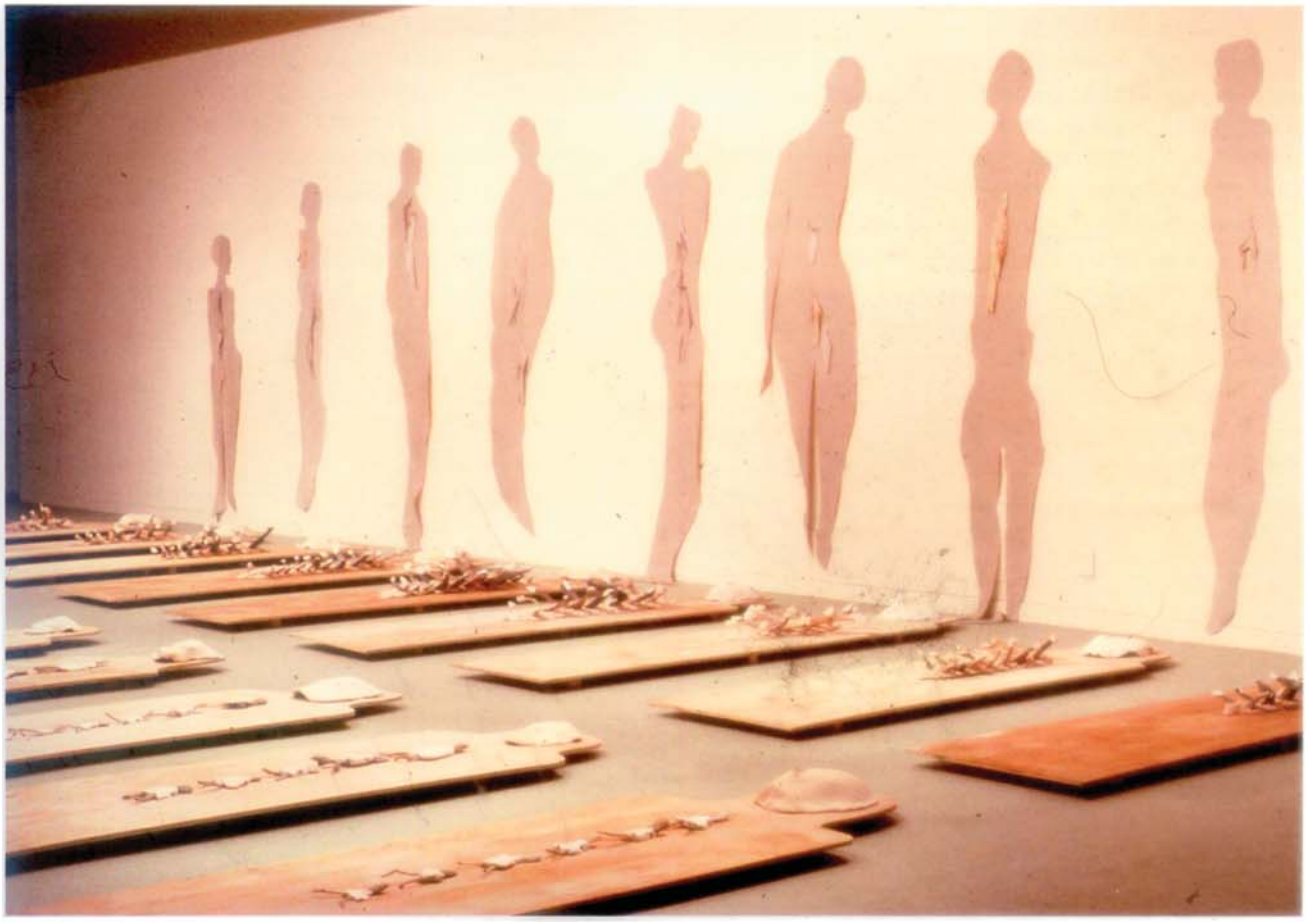
Allen said to me that he hated them, and then he got his students to do a similar thing, two or three years later. But his version was that he got students to go up Maungawhau and throw toilet paper all over the mountain.

E.H.: Have you continued to do this kind of work?

C.H.: Not very often, but yes. The other thing I do with photographs is that I collage them.

E.H.: Are they invariably black-and-white, rather than colour?

C.H.: No, I like playing with colour in the collages. But black-and-white makes it look serious, doesn't it!



E.H.: The colours and textures of natural phenomena in the collages you're showing me, makes them of-a-piece with your sculpture. Did your love of particularly native New Zealand flora and fauna develop early in your life?

C.H.: Yes, we grew up across the road from a whole lot of bush, which was our playground. When we would go for walks, my father would say what the names of the trees were. And we spent every Christmas holiday at the beach. I knew from fairly early on that I didn't want to do portraits or figures. They'd been done perfectly well by many people for years, and being original is important to me. I was passionate about the landscape; I'd spent a lot of time up Mt Taranaki so I made the flat things with landscape shapes. A lot of them were taken from views over the Hunua Ranges and over the islands from a light aircraft, because a friend who flew would take me up. But I didn't want that 'God' thing, which goes on in McCahon and a lot of Renaissance art, where the view of the landscape is from above. I wanted to get 'down here'. Also, McCahon had said to me, because I didn't have a foreground-midground-background, 'what are you doing about the background?' That was something to think about.

E.H.: What *did* you do?

C.H.: The background became the place you put it in. Of course, that might be round behind you as well, where you're doing an installation and you're trying to be sensitive to the place. The background is no longer McCahon's background—there are all sorts of other kinds

E.H.: It can be an outdoor setting, as with your Auckland Domain sculpture. That work is an example of your ongoing interest in constructing what are almost *equivalents* of natural forms, in different materials, or pieced together in an unusual way like the birds at Artis. It is different from *depicting* nature in something like a painting.

C.H.: Yes, absolutely. There have been so many bad representations of the landscape in New Zealand. And when I was younger, it was a sacrosanct subject. The landscape was . . . I don't know, a shrine? You had to do something that threw it away, because shrines are pretty limiting.

E.H.: So it was like portraiture or figure painting—you felt it had been done?

(below) CHRISTINE HELLYAR *Cook's Gardens*.2003
Cloth, fibre, cane & bamboo, dimensions variable

(opposite above) CHRISTINE HELLYAR *Peaceful Pacific Pools* 2007
Copper & bronze, 250 x 250 mm.

(opposite below) CHRISTINE HELLYAR *Unwrapped Rocks* 1980
Clay & stones. 400 x 200 mm.

C.H.: And I was no good at painting. I've had painting exhibitions, I *like* paint, and I'm interested in it, but it's just another material.

E.H.: You mentioned earlier that people see you as a feminist artist. Do you consider yourself as such?

C.H.: I'm interested in gender and in what women do. I never considered myself a feminist until I started teaching at Elam, and in the early 1980s there was this huge groundswell of need from the students themselves. Then it became a political thing for me. I used to show with Women's Art Movement groups occasionally. I think the main problem with women artists is the men writers. People have been lost along the way, and have maybe been rediscovered because of what happened in the '70s. The problem for me is my principal motivation has always been just to be better as an artist. Being political doesn't help that, I don't think.

E.H.: A number of women artists, who identified with feminism in the 1970s and '80s, were reacting against what they perceived as a peculiarly male-oriented set of standards associated with formalism's purely aesthetic values. And perhaps that's why they didn't want to do, say, modernist abstraction. They wanted to propose alternative values.

C.H.: I think that's an easy way out: to actually turn your back on something, and invent something else. But it's very difficult for me to speak for other women artists. The aesthetics have always been important to me. Velázquez's painting, *Las Meninas*, if you take it just abstractly and formally, is fantastic, and yet it's also powerful in terms of content. It has always been my aim to have that formalist quality without being a formalist.

E.H.: In a 1988 article in the *New Zealand Listener*, you were quoted as saying, 'what is important to me is *quality* of work, rather than content of work'. Clement Greenberg or Petar Vuletic could have said that! What did *you* mean by 'quality'?

C.H.: It's really hard to describe. I suppose something which has got readability by a big range of people, not just a narrow group. Also, 'quality' means something that is not just momentary, but something that over time gives you more. That it's significant and understandable in this time and place to a reasonably wide range of people. Maybe!

E.H.: In the same article, you were also a bit critical of what you saw as a tendency towards intellectual, ideas-based art. Isn't *your* art ideas-based?

C.H.: 'Intelligent' and 'intellectual' are two different things, though, aren't they? I don't know. A lot of the work by conceptual artists is being revived again. Students are interested in it, writers are interested in it again, and art museums are exhibiting it.

In the context of that time, it is interesting. But it's a bit dry.

E.H.: Perhaps that's because, either by intention or interpretation, it tends to be reduced to definable or specified concepts: 'this means this'.

C.H.: Hmm. It just seems to me, if you can have something that is conceptual, aesthetic, formalist and significant in time and place, why not go for all of it? Why limit yourself?

E.H.: Lita Barrie discussed 'complex, layered meanings' when writing about your work. Is there a tension between her intellectual reading of the art, as against your intuitive approach?

C.H.: Oh, no, I always liked what Lita wrote. She was brave enough to say things that other people wouldn't. Cheryll Sotheran was a good writer at that time too.

E.H.: Maybe I'm barking up the wrong tree, but I got the impression you might value a response to your work on the level of feelings and associations, rather than necessarily an explanation of what it means.

C.H.: OK, yes, good. I like it when people tell me different things about my work.

E.H.: I am interested also that you say that you want a wide audience, not a narrow one. Should art be entertaining?

C.H.: Yes! Should it be decorative? Yes! Why not?!

E.H.: Well, historically, these are seen as trivial, compared to the higher values of art.

C.H.: Well, surely if you're giving something to somebody for looking at, smelling, listening to, thinking about, or whatever, that's a form of entertainment. Beethoven is entertainment, isn't it? So why *can't* art be entertainment? As an artist, I want to give people something. The first time I went to Europe, travelling around art galleries, cathedrals and museums, I realised that there's an incredibly powerful European sense of beauty. I wanted my own kind of beauty. I wanted a sense, not just of New Zealand, but of the Pacific. Giving beauty to people is a worthwhile thing to do, I think.