

Making a scene



LEFT Christchurch sculptor Phil Price in his studio in Sydenham. You can find one of his kinetic sculptures in a city near you. Photo: Peter Meecham

PHIL PRICE IS A SCENE STEALER – HE’LL TAKE A PUBLIC SPACE, INSERT ONE OF HIS UNIQUE KINETIC SCULPTURES, AND MAKE IT HIS OWN. BUT ONCE YOU GET IT BACK, YOU’LL BE VERY GLAD HE DID
BY LEE SUCKLING

Phil Price’s kinetic sculptures are famous within their surroundings. Yet somehow, they also blend seamlessly into the fabric of the town in which they’re installed. City natives talk about the pieces, wind-powered works of art that move continuously at the whims of the elements, as if they are their own. Just ask any Wellingtonian about the giant pin on a pedestal in Evans Bay, or any Cantabrian about the broken red egg on Manchester Street.

The artist’s mastery of mechanical engineering didn’t happen overnight. Growing up in Nelson, Price began thinking with a mechanical mindset from a very young age. From go-carts to dinghies, he loved “making stuff” – and destroying stuff too. He had a burning desire to pull things apart and put them back together again.

As a teenager, Price developed an infatuation with motorbikes. “The early development of the motorcycle was a revolution,” he says. “The aesthetic of the first motorbikes in the 1920s and 30s had to embrace usefulness. They needed to go fast, and to go around corners. In order to do this, they needed a motor and two wheels. Everything on early bikes utilised what was available to do a certain job. They were a happy medium of something that worked beautifully and looked beautiful.”

After completing a degree in fine arts at the University of Canterbury, Price began his sculpture career in the 1990s, doing project management for artist Neil Dawson. Born in Christchurch, Dawson had developed an international reputation for his fresh take on sculpture; creating a name for himself in public art. He is best known in New Zealand for his more recent pieces, notably Chalice in Christchurch’s Cathedral Square, and Ferns in Wellington’s Civic Square. Price, then a young artist finding his feet, was eager to follow in his footsteps.

Dawson says: “While Phil worked as a project manager for me, rather than as an artist, I could always see his burgeoning passion for sculpture. He gained a real talent for the logistical, technical side of art during the

time we worked together. Managing the development of pieces such as Vanishing Stairs in Kuala Lumpur, Phil learned to deal with the challenges of public space over gallery space. The enthusiasm that came out with his early exposure to public work was phenomenal.”

After his unofficial art apprenticeship with Dawson, Price took a position as an art teacher at Christchurch’s Christ’s College. The job let him develop a career in sculpture – with contributions to both the school and the wider public – and stay in New Zealand to provide for his young family. It was the inspiration and encouragement from both Neil Dawson and Christ’s College that spurred Price on to develop a career as a modern artist.

“Kiwis don’t back themselves; it’s in our culture to think that we’re too small, too insignificant to really succeed,” says Price. “I’ve spent years working with respected people in their field, all of whom have accomplished what they have for what they can produce, not where they produce it. Just because I create my work in Christchurch, not Berlin, doesn’t mean my objects aren’t any good.”

IT WAS a piece by American George Rickey which sparked Price’s interest in kinetic art. During a visit to the sculpture park of Alan and Jenny Gibbs in Kaipara, he was stopped dead by a Rickey sculpture. This piece, consisting of four square, box-like objects which were joined together but moved independently, had him mesmerised. The form, Price says, was so much better and more complex than any other kinetic work he’d ever seen, and it sparked a challenge for him to find out how it worked.

“Rickey’s works were symbolic, working objects, the amalgamation of the formal, where the pieces still represent something, mashed with the surreal and the abstract,” he says. From that instant of initial discovery in Kaipara, Price thought, “Right, I’m going to have a go at that.”

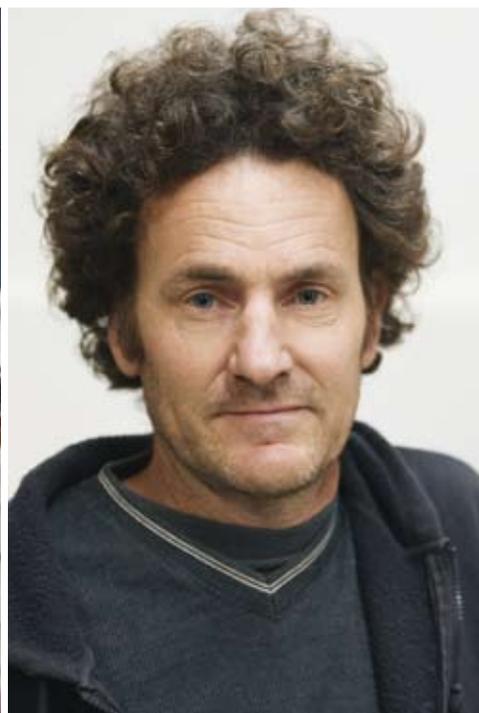
And have a go he did. His breakthrough piece, Protoplasm, was installed in Wellington in 2002, and is perhaps best described as a series of four lime-green pebbles atop a plinth that take over the space around them, swivelling in any which way the wind directs.

Price has since gone on to create a family of sculptures inspired by the shapes he sees in nature: fish fins, birds’ wings, bee stings. The pieces are placed in a variety of locales around the country but are bound together by a continuing organic form melted into high-tech design. From Zephyrometer, Wellington’s orange needle of energy, to Cytoplasm, Auckland Harbour’s monochromatic series of extraterrestrial plates, the similarities in each Phil Price design are unmistakably part of his unique brand of art.

Price’s work is rich in historical art associations. You can see influences in his pieces from the form and function of kinetic artworks by Alexander Calder, inventor of the mobile. Constantin Brancusi, the first sculptor to incorporate the use of a pedestal as a part of the work itself, is another clear inspiration. And fellow New Zealander Len Lye, whose kinetic sculptures gained international recognition in the 1960s, is an obvious immediate force of influence.

You can even see the connection to Surrealism in his work, particularly harking back to the colourful elements and trajectories of Miro, the metamorphosis of forms by Salvador Dali, and even the mischievousness of Antoni Gaudi’s famed edifices in Barcelona.

Alongside his initial artistic inspiration, Price also takes the ideal of creating a brand from George Rickey’s philosophy. “Rickey created a marketable, branded marque of sculpture,” says Price. “Everything he did was distinctly his own because he took hold of every part of the process himself, never letting anybody else represent him.” Price holds the key to all of his relationships, and he truly owns everything ‘Phil Price’ – something he admired of both Rickey and his former employer, Neil Dawson. He takes charge of everything from artistic conception to industry communication,



“I want my brand cemented as world-class art, for people to look at it anywhere in the world and say ‘That’s a Phil Price’”

ABOVE LEFT Price’s Nucleus, on Manchester Street in Christchurch.
Photo: Kirk Hargreaves

ABOVE CENTRE Price puts the finishing touches to Protoplasm, in central Wellington.
Photo: Craig Simcox

ABOVE RIGHT In his studio in Christchurch, Price contemplates the future of his next giant-scale work.
Photo: Peter Meecham

and makes his own rules. “A lot of artists miss out when someone else represents them,” he says. “Representatives tell the world what one’s art is, but I want to let my art speak for itself.”

Price decided to pursue a career as a kinetic sculptor because he saw a gap in the New Zealand market, a place with no competition where he could develop a reputation in the industry that people trust. He has always had a strong interest in the ability of materials, is fond of scale and has a mindset that anything is do-able. “A lot of artists at the time of my emergence thought large, moving, outdoor works were too difficult. This compelled me to choose it as ‘my media’ and deciding that I wanted to make a place for kinetic artwork,” he says. “People were never interested in kinetic art when I started out, but now I’ve got artists copying me.”

Price’s passion for wind-reactive kinetic sculpture, rather than motorised kinetic artwork, is particularly relevant to New Zealand. “We are one of the windiest places in the world, and it is part of our culture to talk about the weather,” he says. “We live with the wind – in a country of coastlines, and with the coast comes the weather.”

Price’s goal is to create the most ambitious sculpture of scale in New Zealand. If he could put a piece anywhere, he’d install something on one of the islands of the Hauraki Gulf. “That place is a piece of environmental candy,” he says. “The presence in the landscape has amazing proportions.”

Kinetic art gives Price the chance to create a piece relevant to its surroundings and people, while being a step above stationary public art. “It’s like the difference between a picture and a moving picture, a painting and a film.”

PRICE IS a visual interpreter. He is an observant person who gets inspiration from everything around him. He quotes Neil Dawson to say that he’s a “product of his environment”.

“For most artists, I think everything in life is an influence. When I was working with Neil, he lived by the beach and constantly made sculptures inspired by boats,” Price says. “I’ve spent most of my sculpture career living in the windiest place in North Canterbury, so I’ve just been inspired by what’s out my window.”

Price creates both private commissions and public work, but has no preference over the two. While he’s often given free reign to create something from scratch for the public eye, Price has no problem taking direction from private buyers. “I really give collectors credit. They know what they want. Some artists think commissioning is rubbish, and feel true art needs a clean slate. I’m happy to work with people, to replicate something in a different colour with something else added onto it, if that’s what they’re after,” he says.

Price’s current favourite piece of New Zealand art is Mark Whyte’s Coal Pile, in Christchurch. “It’s a sleeping monument,” he says. “People might be offended by it now, but in 20 years time, it’ll still be there. In 50 years time, when it’s suggested that the infamous pile of coal be replaced, there’ll be outrage. People will appreciate the history of its controversy, and will never want to see it gone.”

Conversely, the only debate to surround Price’s artwork has been the price of any given piece, each of which can cost over \$100,000. “The media do stress the issue of public spending on everything, especially artwork. They want the public to ask

‘Why is this money being spent on this?’ However, what they don’t emphasise is that many of my works are funded by healthy philanthropic input.”

“When public work is embraced, it’s a success,” says Price. “Because I don’t create politically charged work, I’ve been lucky enough for all of my pieces to be widely accepted by the communities in which they are installed. Once the public accept it, it’s a winner.” He believes his art is enjoyed across the globe because he’s not trying to sell international trends back to the rest of the world – he follows his own unique direction.

“I think my sculpture works both in New Zealand and overseas because I have a unique, singular voice. My works aren’t culture-specific. New Zealand art doesn’t have a place on the world continuum because we too often make it about our own cultural history. We try to regurgitate international styles back to the rest of the world, with just a tweak in local flavour. We’re a very young culture, so when we put our past on the world scale, they don’t care,” he says. “I’m more focused on creating something that people want purely because they like the aesthetic of it.”

What does the future hold for Phil Price?

“I’ve penetrated the domestic market as I had planned to and now want to spend some time getting better worldwide exposure,” he says. “I want my brand cemented as world-class art; for people to look at it anywhere in the world and say ‘That’s a Phil Price.’” With private commissions this year for media mogul Rupert Murdoch’s mother, and an exhibition for the Crown Prince of Denmark in the grounds of his summer castle, Phil Price is certainly on his way. **YW**