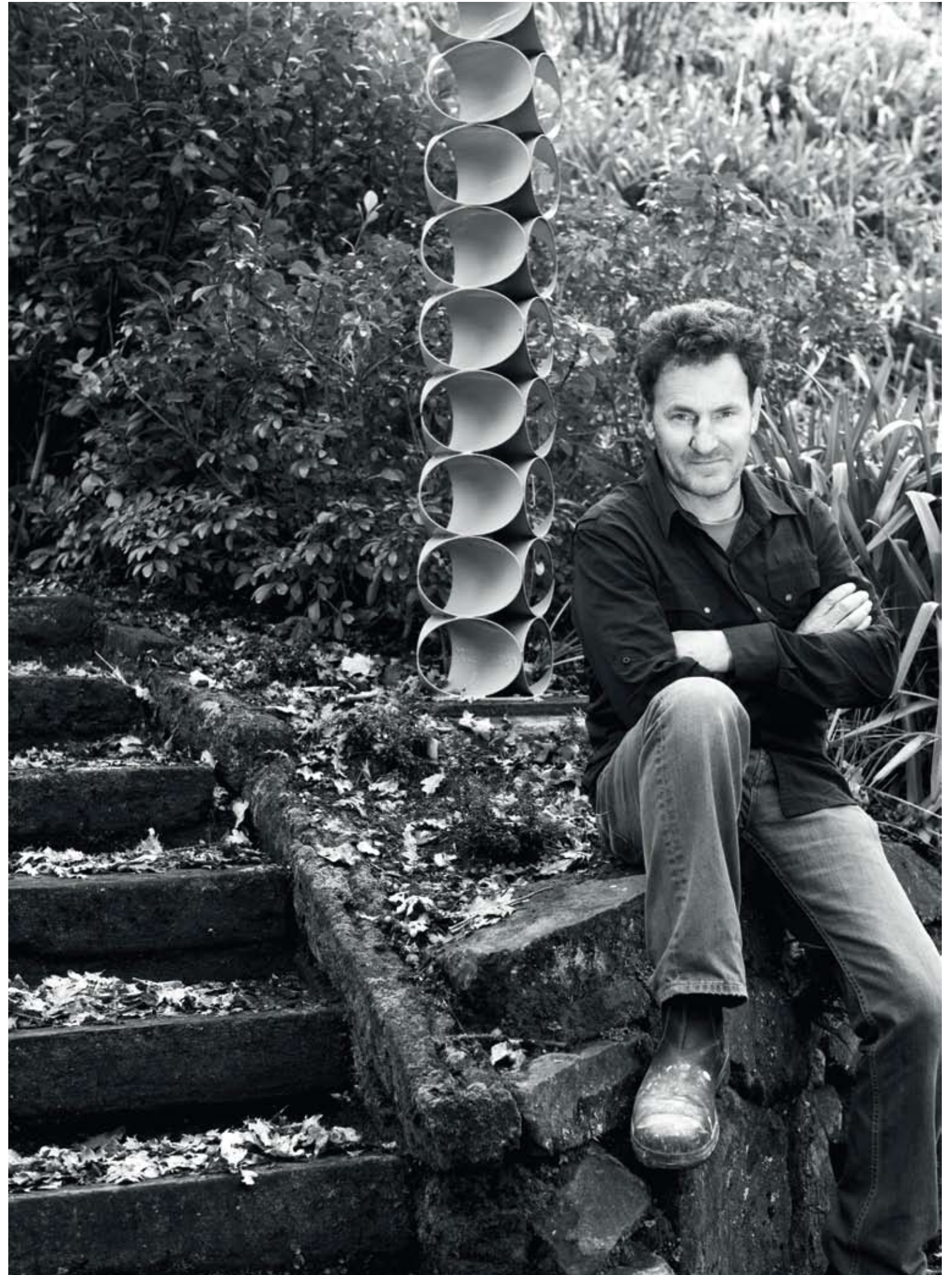


# BLOWING IN THE WIND

PHIL PRICE'S KINETIC SCULPTURES ARE AS MUCH FEATS OF ENGINEERING AS THEY ARE WORKS OF ART WORDS LEE SUCKLING

PHOTOGRAPHY BY (LEFT) SHAUN WAUGH, (RIGHT) GUY FREDERICK



“I WANT TO BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY BY THE ART WORLD AND PUT SMILES ON CHILDREN’S FACES AT THE SAME TIME”

PHIL PRICE’S SCULPTURES stand tall, gyrating hypnotically in the breeze, swinging, unfurling, spinning ... landmarks amongst their surroundings. Phil’s feats of kinetic engineering are not powered by mechanics but by the wind. His career as a sculptor started in the sandpit. Growing up in Nelson, he was fascinated by how things were put together. He didn’t know that sculpture existed but he knew he wanted to make things – from sandcastles to dinghies to go-carts. Four decades on, Phil is creating what his engineers call the “elegant solution”.

Managing projects 15 years ago for artist Neil Dawson (best known for *Ferns*, the suspended orb in Wellington’s Civic Square, and *Raindrops* in Manchester, England) crystallized Phil’s desire to pursue his own artistic ambitions. However, he needed a steady income to support his growing family. An unexpected solution presented itself – teaching art at Christ’s College in Christchurch. This gave him the opportunity to develop his sculpture by way of commissions for the school and the wider New Zealand community. Recognition of his work came in 2002 when he won a nationwide competition run by Meridian Energy. *Zephyrometer*, the giant orange knitting needle now installed in Wellington, is still his best-known piece.

Christ’s College played a big part in Phil’s success. “The school’s encouragement and support in my drive to get my art out there was a key kick-off point in my career,” he says. “I never thought I would get into teaching. However, there aren’t too many reliable jobs in art and it gave me an opportunity to explore sculpture, work and stay in Christchurch for my young daughter.”

Phil describes himself as an industrial designer. He took his original inspiration from a sculpture by kinetic artist George Rickey. The piece, a series of four box-like elements which were joined together but moved autonomously, was unlike anything he’d ever seen. “I was in awe of this symbolic, working object,” he says. “It was the combination of the formal, where the art still represented something, mixed with the abstract.”

The ingenuity of Phil’s own pieces comes from a marriage of engineering and form. He is a disciple of what he calls the “new architectural movement” which throws modular construction out of the window. “The Industrial Revolution was constructed out of rectangular bricks which all fitted,” he says. “However, we’re now in the Digital Revolution where everything is controllable and can be unique.”

He starts with an image of a natural object: a fish fin or bird’s wing. He then mutates it into a concept of movement using high-tech design. This control, he says, “brings construction closer to



PREVIOUS PAGES:  
*United Divided* at Cable Bay Vineyard, Waiheke Island; Phil with a work from the *Stak* series at Ohinetahi, Sir Miles Warren’s property at Governors Bay. CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: *Morpheus* at Aarhus, Denmark; *Tri* at Bondi, Sydney; *Protoplasm*, Lambton Quay, Wellington; *Wana*, Cable Bay Vineyard; Phil at work in the studio; *Mantis*, Amisfield Vineyard, Queenstown; *Quattro*, Brick Bay Sculpture Trail, Matakana.

nature and its organic forms, in which nothing is ever exactly the same but things are just right.”

Working from his warehouse studio, Phil utilizes a team of hand-picked specialists. Every aspect of a piece’s manufacture is a hands-on process, from mould production to paint finish. His commitment extends even to the on-site installation of his pieces. “We’re a boutique sculpture agency,” he says. “We like to do everything ourselves, from the initial concept drawings to putting the last bolt in the ground. There are only half a dozen of our sculptures around the world that my team and I haven’t installed ourselves.”

Phil’s pieces around New Zealand are easily recognized: *Protoplasm*, the rotating green discs in Wellington’s Lambton Quay; *Nucleus*, the breaking and re-forming red lollipop in Christchurch; and *Cytoplasm*, the series of alien-looking silver plates which spin on many angles in the Auckland Viaduct. In addition to his local successes, Phil has been gaining international exposure. Earlier this year a prominent commission hit the headlines. *Ibis*, sitting on an island in an ornamental lake, was a 100th-birthday gift for Elisabeth, Rupert Murdoch’s mother. Additionally, Phil has been invited to exhibit at a once-in-a-lifetime ball at the Crown Prince of Denmark’s summer castle.

Phil likes his work to be enjoyed for what it is, not for what it means. He quotes 1960s kinetic artist Alexander Calder, saying “work is celebration”. “Sure, I want to get people revved up but only because of the nature of the object, not what’s behind it. I don’t mean I think my work is flippant in any way but my goal is simply to please everyone. I want to be taken seriously by the art world and put smiles on children’s faces at the same time.”

PHOTOGRAPHY BY (FROM FAR LEFT) PHIL PRICE, CATHERINE HARRISON, BRUCE FOSTER, SHAUN WAUGH, GUY FREDERICK, DAZ CAULTON, CATHERINE HARRISON

