



Receptacle for Memories, Janet Chambers, 2005, Dust, PVA wood glue, white oak, muslin dyed with acrylic paint, 2125 mm high x 750 mm wide x 500 mm deep. Photo: Joanna Osborne.

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Interview

Janet Chambers

Sculptor

Janet Chambers is a recent graduate in sculpture from Canterbury University School of Fine Arts. Chambers has a background in architecture, which she studied in Sheffield, Yorkshire, before working in London and the USA. She came to New Zealand in 1987 and returned to study at art school in 2001. Chambers talks with Peter Crothall about sculptural practice and how her faith, life experience and architectural background feed into her work.

PC: So would you like to describe the continuity and the difference between architecture and sculpture?

'The constant interest in the visual is in common. I think an interest in three-dimensional space, and the movement of people through space – that's something I've dealt with in my work – I planned to get people moving through the work and I like working on a fairly large scale most of the time, manipulating space and circulation in the space. But on the other hand I do think there are really major differences in how you work as an architect from how you work as a sculptor. There's an incredible freedom in being an artist actually, you can do what you like. You won't necessarily get paid for it, but there are a lot of constraints in working in the building industry, working

to a brief and with a client. It's art and science that are different; with the sculpture you need to try to set free your imagination much more. There are a lot of architects who would like to be as imaginative as they can, but the people are constantly getting you back in line.

Response to global events

'With the subject I felt I was increasingly dealing with Christianity. In the first half of my 4th year I was doing work that stemmed from my feelings about what I was reading in the newspapers, particularly social issues. My work in the psychology area called *World News* was about my feelings as I saw pictures in the papers of people who have been damaged by situations in the world. My collection of newspaper cuttings was partly chosen for their gestural quality and the feeling of helpless outrage I have when I see children in dreadful situations of extreme need. The lack of respect for the value of the lives of brown skinned people is something I feel deeply about.'

PC: So how does this relate back to your faith?

'I know that Christians might come to different conclusions on social issues and worldviews, but as Christians we are often sensitised. You can't cocoon yourself away from feeling about things. I got more personal in the second half of my 4th year and went back to my relationship with my mother... in the style of Trevor Moffit – except it being fairly rough and gestural perhaps; thinking about the relationship with a parent. It was a similar subject about memories and things.

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Janet Chambers. Photo: Joanna Osborne.

'The sculpture came first and I wrote the poem *Receptacle for Memories* afterwards. It is based on a puppet theatre – a western style puppet theatre – and it's empty because that's headspace for you. It's a ragged puppet theatre with a head on top of it. It's an anthropomorphic work, which both of these works are – it looks like a person except it has long skinny legs, the other has little skinny legs. I started also with ideas about the experience of clearing out a house for an elderly person.

Memory and Dream

'I thought the experience of being at art school gave me an opportunity to reflect on my life as a whole. I was using it in a different way to the people who were leaving high school preparing for life. I feel work like that also resonates more with people of my generation. When I was an architect, you would work



logically through a process and it would be defensible rationally at every stage. There would be a logical process when you developed the plans. Now with this, it came out of a dream-like image; quite different.'

PC: So what did you discover about your own voice?

'To backtrack slightly, the sculpture of the sheepfold in its first installation was in a more shady place; it was revealed by blowing away the leaves. That had formal qualities, so people could accept and enjoy it on a formal level. It's like drawing in the air, three-dimensionally, and it's the New Zealand landscape in that Canterbury tradition. As well as a formal quality, it had Christian meaning. I was even using symbolism to decide how many rods, how long - that sort of thing.

'I might think "How many rods? I might do twelve for the twelve apostles and I'll put the spikes on it. I think this one's Judas." No one looking at the work necessarily knows any of that. But in my own mind I've woven these things in.

'It's a bit like the decision-making I was doing round

my own body, which is quite a common thing in sculpture. Deciding the weight I could carry, my length when I lay on the ground, my own footstep as I walked round in a circle, that sort of thing. You have to make decisions about how long, how many, how big you make it so it looks right. I suppose the basic thing is – does it look good to me? It is also good to have some grist to the mill to make decisions. I think that adds a certain depth.'

PC: Would you recommend art school for other people coming back at your age?

'If you can hack it, it's tremendous, yes. You are in a slightly awkward position as a mature student because you're the odd one out. But over four years I got more fellow feeling with the group I was coming through with. At first I was sort of invisible, or semi-invisible. But it's quite interesting being a fly on the wall, watching.

'I was also catching up with the history of art, I felt I brought myself through the 20th century to catch up with the present moment, to become more aware of where we are in general philosophy. I did philosophy of art; it gives you a little bit of a lead-in to philosophy generally.

Art school and following Jesus.

'The students are often a blank sheet to any Christian concepts; they're not anti, they're not for – they're just pleasantly neutral. One thing I found at the art school was the freedom to discuss things about spirituality, so long as people didn't feel you were propagandising. In an average office people don't necessarily want any talk about spirituality. At the School of Fine Arts nothing was off limits. All the big questions – life, death, and sex – could be discussed. Spirituality is almost becoming an interesting, dangerous sort of subject and is fresh to people who have no background. There is a shortage of subject matter. Once you have explored yourself, where do you go? I think spirituality is lurking round in the background as suitable subject matter.

'People have a smorgasbord concept of religion. They think something is a nice idea and collect it along with another idea they have got from, say, Confucianism. They are not going to buy into "this is the way".'

As well as her time at art school, Janet Chambers is also quietly enthusiastic about her future plans. She's just completed an Easter installation for her church based on the idea of the curtain ripping in the Temple when Jesus died. In between being a mother to her two sons and wife to husband and doctor, Stephen, she is helping out at church while the pastor is away on sabbatical. Chambers is full of ideas, flushed with the invigorating experience of art theory/studio practice, glimpses of community and end of year exhibition; looking forward to exploring how to build on those years between the busyness of life and family.

Peter Crothall