



Chalice, Neil Dawson, 2000, Steel, aluminium, black granite. 18m high, 1.2m diameter at ground, 8.5m diameter at top. Located at Christchurch Cathedral Square. Photo: Andrew Clarkson.

Interview

Neil Dawson

Regarding *Chalice*

The actual form of this sculpture came into being over a period of decades. After hanging *Echo* in 1981¹ in the North Quad space at the Arts Centre in Christchurch (the first contemporary hanging, public artwork out and up in our city) Neil reflected on concepts, created other major works internationally, and continually urged the Christchurch City Council to adopt more public, accessible art. Others joined him in this plea, for example Garry Arthur, John Coley, Sam Mahon and Llew Summers (the latter exhibiting works in public at his own expense).

Neil says of his site-specific, hanging works '...one gets to know each in glances' and 'when people describe my work, they describe the day – they think of the whole experience...not just the object'. The sculptor's work takes on meaning from the changing aspect of weather and people's own experiences in relation to each piece, which relates to his concept of community. He references his 'art in life' philosophy to growing up in areas where marae visits were the most

powerful experience of original art (Wairarapa and Hawkes Bay). He was impressed by *whakairo*/carving and Maori concepts of art as integral to living.

He is also keen to work outside the gallery's 'sanctified space' in a shared environment. His concept – inspiration for the structure that would become *Chalice*, was primeval nature alongside the wind – our local 'nor'wester blowing leaves into a vortex'.

The brief he was given from *Turning Point 2000* required him: 'To create a major lasting work to commemorate the 150th Anniversary of Canterbury and celebrate the Millennium, while complementing the Square structures.

Dawson's theme fitted the brief '...complementing natural and cultural history'. He was to construct (with up to 100 others working on the project over three years) a controversial, worthy, '...zingy presence of the modern.'²

The artist says, 'The leaf patterns represent the natural environment ... the historic eco-system ... the conical shape denotes expansion, growth; makes reference to aquifers spurting forth under the Plains'. He feels it was confirmed in its place by people naturally using it as a memorial after 9/11 – a space to stop, think, look up, be in touch with life. It is a secular space but with a reflexive, inverse echo of the Cathedral's spire. The tile patterns (hexagonal) of the Cathedral are incorporated in the underpinning framework of the 48 leaves, other attributions recall Victorian silverware and architecture. 'The name *Chalice* followed the concept.' Linking his fingers and then steeping and raising his hands to extend them, he expansively remarks that he thinks of it '...as a vessel having myriad associations and possibilities opening out...' (he pauses and reflects) '...there are Maori legends that relate to this reaching for the sky and I've been told by Maori that what they love about my work is the suspension between Rangī and Papa. The *Chalice* operates within that linking space...a stairway to Heaven as in *tukutuku* panels...'

Certainly it makes one look up at the sheer genius of the concept and construction. It reaches up 5 stories or 18 metres in height. When the *Chalice* was lit up for the first time on the evening of 7 September 2001, Neil thanked his mother (who was there) and commented: 'It was a surreal moment seeing the realization of my crazy idea'. His other works that reference connections between earth and sky are the many sculptures both here and in Australia where the feather features, e.g. Takahanga Marae's *Kahu*. Dawson refers to bird feathers as '...exquisite fragments of the original inhabitants'. Each of his sculptures draws its being from the site, the ideas he has, and his intention to work with the community to bring each person into a knowledge of art and to react.

Juliana Venning

1 1991 reinstalled permanently.

2 Christchurch Press editorial 10 September 2001.