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The welding of Yorkshire and Christchurch

An interview with sculptor Jim Instone

With a name like Instone you'd expect Jim to be a sculptor. He is. He's also a bit of a magpie, hunting through Christchurch scrap yards for enamelled doors, desiccated car parts, weathered pieces of warped and bent metal which he crafts into beautiful sculptures – mainly fauna (salmon, herons, New Zealand falcons, magpies, eels). A glorious kotuku rises from his back lawn with outstretched wings and perfect trailing legs. You expect it to disappear over the fence, until you notice the eye is made from a bike cog. With a masterful sense of form and an accurate rendering of limb, wing and claw from an unforgiving medium, Jim Instone quietly manufactures highly creative pieces at his Linwood property. He is in complete control of his medium, which is perhaps one of the hardest to master and manipulate. A skilled draughtsman, he also paints. Again, the theme is magpies. I spy an accomplished work on a wall as we roam through his home studio discussing art, literature and his experiences in life.

Instone is from North Yorkshire. Born there in 1937 he grew up during the war (lost his mother at age four in a blackout car crash) but remembers that period as an exciting time shielded somewhat from the tragedies and sufferings of many. His town was set in a bend of the river, a landmark that stood out like a sore thumb to marauding German bombers. 'But the joke was,' says Instone, 'that as the Luftwaffe passed over our town it looked like it had already been bombed, so they never bothered,' which statement terminates in his generous Yorkshire laugh.

He was good at drawing at school and was one of two finalists for a scholarship to art school. Coming from a working-class family where, after the war, the securities of a trade were valued over personal preference, his father (who had survived the Depression) discouraged such whimsy and steered

the young Yorkshire lad toward engineering. He also served the obligatory National Service.

Instone became a boilermaker but his interest in sculpture and art remained, fuelled by an avant garde movement in modernist sculpture in his home country at that time. The artist is largely self-taught, through evening classes and working with artists he admired, such as Jeff Thomson. A Thomson corrugated chicken grazes his back lawn, swapped for one of his own. After boiler making and shipbuilding, he obtained a teaching certificate and became a metal work craft teacher in England. He emigrated from Yorkshire to Christchurch in 1974 with his wife Frances, a potter, for a two-year engineering contract and stayed for 30. He was a teacher for over 25 years including seven or eight years teaching metal work at Linwood Intermediate School and living for a while on the West Coast.

JS: How did your teaching and arts practice interrelate?

'I came into New Zealand as a heavy-seam boilermaker but also had a secondary school teaching certificate. It was an excellent experience. The programme at Linwood was quite evenly weighted. It was not just a boys' activity; educationalists were getting away from gender-specific approaches. But we had separate classes, not mixed, so boys weren't showing off all the time. I found that a delightful atmosphere to work in.

'I didn't make girlie things. We started on garden implements, which might sound a bit boring, but it involved welding, riveting and brazing, and we used stainless steel. They designed the handle, so it involved a design feature, not just repeating what the teacher applied. I taught at a Polytechnic in North Notts, Nottingham, I was also in North Lindsey,

Above and Right: Jim Instone at work.
Photos: John Stringer



'Not really. I was eight when it ended. I did lose my mother during the war, and was raised by a grandmother, which I recommend. I was an evacuee child. I lived in a steel town, so was moved out to the Yorkshire Dales. It was quite a fascinating time and I was removed from the horrors. I found myself on a farm amid loads of Italian prisoners of war and all sorts of strange things. It wasn't traumatic. I was fortunate to be raised by a strong extended family. There were shortages of everything, but by the time the sixties came along, I thought I was in heaven.'

Could you talk about the duality of your work; your modernist geometric work and 'folk' welded art? How do those two interact for you?

'I'm always fascinated by what we call "modern" sculpture. I find the animalistic stuff easier and can extend them to a form of abstraction in a way, with elongation. Making pure sculptural form I find quite difficult and am still working on that. I was in a Christchurch scrap yard this morning. There are mountains of the stuff, but the sheer form is there. However, when you extract it from its environment it's very difficult to put it together to maintain the fascination and elegance. In the scrap yard the steel or the bar or tube has been fashioned already, or been abused, something has run over it. Collecting those elements is fine, but it's very difficult to work that into something and control it. You need the tools. So I tend to work with sheet metal. I find objects absolutely fascinating - sculptures in their own right, without me doing much to them [Instone does a lot with his found pieces]. I feel a bit of a fraud presenting them.'

Do you think we have a strong sculptural context in Christchurch?

'I like to celebrate public sculpture. Some pieces exist quietly; they work in their space, like the works at the law courts. They sit so well in the environment they don't attract attention.'

If you had to pick a sculptor that you admired, who would that be?

'The one I follow the most, because I used to go to his evening classes, is Neil Dawson, from his early *Echo*, which still looks good in the Arts Centre, still working after 25 years. His stupendous works he makes abroad now are quite amazing.'

Jim Instone exhibits a little but mainly works on commissions. He was short-listed to make a maquette, for a Christchurch City Council commission, to go on the land near the old gas works, on the corner of Moorhouse Avenue and Waltham Road. The brief is to embrace the industrial culture of the area, which should suit the engineering boilermaker from North Yorkshire, where steel runs in the blood.

John Stringer



Scunthorpe, another engineering town, teaching technical drawing, welding and calculations with young boilermakers. I also taught in an art foundation course, at the metal sculpture end of the programme. It was a nice balance; I was able to use my artistic side and had a wonderful engineering workshop to use as well.

'I was the classic young man who wanted to be an artist but had a father who said no. I could engineer during the day and do whatever I liked at night. I was angry with my father at the time, but it maintained a hunger I think. Because I couldn't have it, I wanted it even more. In the fifties we had the Festival of Britain and it really was a celebration of sculpture, particularly metal. It was a great stimulation. Artists like Butler, Chadwick and Armitage were active.'

Did the wartime period have any impact on your art?

Above: *Astrolabe*, Jim Instone, 2005, Steel, 2m high.