



Interview: Mark Lander

Mixed media artist, Oxford

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Papermaking has been a real passion for artist Mark Lander over the last 15 years and is synonymous with his oeuvre. Mark and his wife Yvette are domiciled in an historic refurbished hotel in Oxford. The Landers are country folk, totally committed to Canterbury because it is rich in the resources Mark needs. Both Oxford and Cust have great flax valleys of the varieties best suited to papermaking and interesting coloured clays the artist makes his paints from. "I feel happiest in a farm town," he says, "because I'm like a primary producer, the people I most readily identify with. And I'm understood in country towns, they understand things like grinding of clays, making of paper from flax, etc. I love the collecting of materials, the harvesting, saying a little prayer as you gather the plant, and I begin to visualise the work of art I'm going to make."

"Papermaking can be very intricate and precious or large and architectural. I was very interested in the huge and architectural at the start. I was contemplating how Durer produced a monumental arch of prints for the King or the Emperor because he couldn't afford a real one. He constructed it out of woodcut prints. It was magnificent."

"It's a wonderful process going back to absolute scratch instead of finding a piece of paper in a store. You're going back a stage further, learning the skills to manufacture your visualisation exactly how you want it. There's less compromise."

JS. Have you been moving away from art making recently and into the business of papermaking?

"It's been a journey of discovery. There's a network of papermakers throughout the world. I was busily doing my thing, there was a knock at the door and there was a paper scientist and his wife from the USA. We had sandwiches, a cup of tea, all the dogs sat round and watched them eat. He said, "What you do is impossible!" I'd developed in isolation to other papermakers, built my own equipment for \$100 out of an old crate and a sink. Overseas it can cost \$15,000. We work on a large scale in New Zealand because we have the resources no one else enjoys, except perhaps in tropical regions. When I go to Chicago, it's a day journey just to get to the outskirts of the city and then there are only bullrushes, which are not great papermaking plants. In NZ we have vast resources to tap into."

"At the moment I've been concentrating on networking. I've always enjoyed education [Mark Lander was an adult educator for 18 years at Hagley Community College]. Now I'm working on the internet. An opportunity will come up to help a village on Niue Island and I'll respond. The overseas Government pays aid money to build the equipment. I create it and ship it; someone else comes in and teaches. The equipment is left there and a cash income is created for the village."

"I'm interested in the art side, but also the aid programmes. Because education has been such a passion of mine, not only educating myself, I enjoy facilitating things for other people."

So, you're creating papermaking equipment here in Oxford, using the internet to find opportunities, contexts like government contracts?

"Also private contracts. This is not my primary focus; it's more like a sabbatical. I'll do this for a few years and then move on, which is always how I've worked - develop a passion and go with it."

Has this taken over from your art making?

"No, definitely not. I'm working right now on the next Chrysalis Seed show, which will be at CoCA in 2005, and I'm doing several private commissions. The loveliest commission I did was for a farmer. His wife came in about his 50th birthday. So I painted a work after researching



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Mark with one of his papermaking machines.

about them. I got the clay out of their water race, and made the paint, took the flax out of another part of the farm and made the paper. Because it was a dry land farm, I placed a beautiful fountain in the middle of the painting; they had so many children, so there were so many trees, etc. It was all very personal.

"After working for 15 years with dealer galleries, I'd never actually met anyone who bought one of my paintings. It was all done through a second or third party. It's been thrilling to be grounded this way, instead of feeling disconnected. I prefer the direct route.

"At the moment I'm negotiating to move back into the dealer gallery system. I have an offer from a gallery up north, to be part of their "stable" of artists. I don't like the word "stable", it implies you're a race horse and we all know what happens to race horses that don't perform. You can go for so long and you run a bit dry, you get burnt out, next thing you get the letter...it hurts, it's taken me a while to get over the rejection of all that. Art is a business, and you can't be a naive person, that everything you do is wonderful. There has to be a context. For any business the bottom line is, it has to be able to function."

How long do you think this networking period is going to last, and do you have any sense of what's coming next?

"I'm itching to get back into more painting. At the moment it's 60% papermaking and 40% art. I'd like to reverse that, to be more 80% art 20% other."

What about your pottery?

"I love that side. I had to take my lovely three-phase kiln out of my house, because of the fire risk, in this old hotel, and needing the space for the family. The kiln is in parts out the back waiting for me to reassemble it. I primarily created ceramics as elements for installation works. But once you start studying the history of ceramics you want to explore all that. It was a marvellous passion that lasted six or seven years. It takes a couple of years of experimenting. I've always believed if you've got an inspiration, just follow it."

Where is your faith in your practice at the moment, between the art and papermaking. Has there been any evolution there?

"I'm always mindful of God's voice and asking Him what is next. Life is tremendously exciting. I follow inspiration, a bit like the pillar of fire in the Bible. When it picked up and moved, the Israelites moved with it. Inspiration might take you places that others don't understand, or disapprove of. 'A more sensible option might be for Mark to do this, or that'. I have to go with what I feel, otherwise it becomes a plod doing things you don't enjoy. I'd rather follow excitement. If you feel excited about what you're doing, then other people will too. People are always quick to look and feel for the 'spirit' behind a painting. What is actually going on here? That's part of where my faith is, following a leading. Who knows where it's going to take me."

What's inspiring you at the moment?





Papermaking Hui: 'lifting the screen'.



Papermaking Hui: 'throwing in the pulp'.



Papermaking Hui: 'stirring the pulp'.



Mark with one of his babies.

"My work has always been autobiographical. It's like a visual diary. Special occasions, like a birth of a child, and family, are important to me. Family is central to me, my first support network."

John Stringer

STOP PRESS:

HUI IN HASTINGS: new teaching opportunities

Mark has just streamed back from a dream time at a marae in Hastings. It was a gathering of 60 teachers from Maori tertiary institutions around the country.

When Mark initially started making his own paper,

it was with some trepidation and fear. 'I felt like I was trespassing on a cultural area.' However when he went to a similar symposium on a marae in Wanganui 10 years ago he was reassured by taumatua and other Maori, who welcomed his experimentation in making paper out of flax.

Mark's enthusiastic and personal approach to teaching papermaking fits well with ways at the marae. No poring over textbooks and grappling with abstract models. Instead Mark starts the class with action and lots of laughter, slicing flax, thrashing the stuff, pulping it; working together as a group, not just as individuals; learning through doing in a spirit of fun and humility so typical of this artist. The motto of the hui was 'head, heart and hands'. The group commented to Mark, 'You put your heart into papermaking'. They caught his passion and enthusiasm for paper making and the desire to pass what he's learned onto others. No concern here about 'intellectual capital' – rather a spirit of generosity and sharing. Unintentionally Mark had already been doing the right protocol. In a very unaffected way, it has been the artist's habit to pray over every visit to harvest and cut more harakeke. In many ways Mark's art and papermaking has deep connections with indigenous values and the art that flows out of them in Aotearoa. A concern for the land and respecting the materials harvested from it is

obvious. More in the next issue..watch this space.

He adds:

"..I have been away for four days with sixty tutors from the Te Wananga O Aotearoa, at a Hui based on their campus in Hastings.

"My job has been to present my research in the field of hand papermaking, particularly in using New Zealand flax. They have wanted to introduce papermaking into their fine art courses as a complimentary discipline with weaving, painting and wood carving.

"I arrived with a van load of equipment, Hollanders Hydropulpers, moulds, deckles, vats, and boilers. The papermaking complements the weaving as we can use all the scraps of flax – what is discarded from the weaving process. I usually have a very noisy mechanical flaxcutter, that can process a truckload in about an hour...this time we sat around in a circle and used cutter knives, slicing the leaves into one inch lengths for the cooking a lovely quiet process of chatting and laughing. I have brought some pulp so the Hollander is rumbling away in the background.

"We have the vats ready, one for the A1 size paper and a great three by two metre swimming pool size...filled with water ready. Three people with buckets run, scream and throw what looks like liquid cow pat into the vat, there is lots of laughter as four of us take off our shoes and socks and wade in the 'pond' to stir the pulp. Someone calls out 'Hey, isn't that a job supposed to be done by virgins!!!'

"Twenty of us all gather round and pull the loose mould out of the water, there are five of them to make, all laid out in the sun to dry. We could make a ten by seven metre sheet, ...'the biggest in the world' but the local business are complaining that we are using up too much of their water, 'Who's gonna pay for the excess and get off our carpark!!'

"Everyone can have a go at the different disciplines, this is a hands on Hui!

"There is a speech of welcome, lots of beautiful singing and we all sleep on the marae mattresses, the covers of which are big 20 dollar notes, 'Hey...I'm going to sleep on the Queen'.

"There are many international visitors, Terrol from North America brings us some yucca, a traditional weaving material and we make paper from that; Barbara, a professor from New York City, is really enjoying the Aroha love of the marae, she says it is 'So nice to be among civilized people!' And Danny, a cyclist from East Germany, entertains us with stories of living off roadkill in the heart of the Australian desert.

"I already have invitations to go to Gisborne and Huntly, and just about everywhere else. Who made life so busy!!

"Blessings from Mark,

"Yikes...gotta go and bath boys!!"

Mark Lander and Peter Crothall