

PETER NICHOLLS

Tomo 2005

Steam-bent, laminated and tanalised pine and galvanised steel in two loops, one 48 metres in length the other 43 metres, at heights ranging from ground level to 3 meters

Connells Bay Centre for Sculpture.

Audio visual presentation by Dunedin Public Art Gallery.

Photographs by Gil Hanly and Justin Summerton

Essential to Peter Nicholls' practice are works, such as *Tomo*, that respond to and exist in a specific place; works that by their very nature cannot be shown in a gallery. *Tomo*, a private commission for the Connells Bay Centre for Sculpture Park on Waiheke Island, embodies and makes visible what might otherwise be unknown and unseen – the underground water sources that sustain the island. A red airborne flow through a stand of kanuka, it is more than a river; it is an arterial bloodline providing life and connecting people through time. It is both a compelling response to a site and an eloquent expression of Nicholls' underlying concern for natural resources.

PETER NICHOLLS

Wisconsin Series No. 5 1978

Red oak, maple and lead

Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery. Purchased 1983 with the assistance of the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand.

In 1978 Peter Nicholls represented New Zealand at the Edmonton Commonwealth Games Sculpture Symposium, and spent a year teaching and studying at the University of Wisconsin. During this time he explored the ground between the two poles of openly gestural and purely minimalist sculpture – the beginning of his lifelong dedication to ‘going beyond the minimal to the gesture’. He was also interested in the more psychologically challenging work of Canadian sculptor George Trakas, such as his steep, narrow or even partly destroyed paths, where an invitation to discovery was inevitably linked with some degree of risk. In *Wisconsin Series No 5* Nicholls tips a giant upright log past its balance point; something that should cause the sculpture to topple, if not for the counterbalance of a 50-kilogram lead weight.

Nicholls has also created a totem to human industry in the Great Lakes area, evocative of the huge bollards that moor the iron ore-laden ships of Lake Superior and the massive rafts of felled timber that are moved across the lake by highly skilled log walkers. Found washed up on the edge of the lake, the red oak and maple logs have split and cracked as they have dried and aged and Nicholls has allowed this natural process to contribute nature’s, and, in turn, the artist’s, gestural marks to counter the more minimal linearity of the work.

PETER NICHOLLS

Process Action - Full Stop 1979

Pencil on paper

Collection of the Artist

Full Stop, Proposal, Wellington 1979

Pencil on paper

Collection of the Artist

The making of 'Full Stop' 1982

Three-ton boulder, steel plate and timber

Visual presentation: Dunedin Public Art Gallery.

Photographs by Jurgen Weibel and Peter Nicholls

The drawings Nicholls completed for his *Full Stop* project explore and document the process of building a fire pit under a steel slab onto which a 3-tonne boulder, hoisted up by a crane, was dropped from above. On impact the hot steel slab crumpled around the boulder to produce *Full Stop*. Nicholls likens the work to a rough-hewn flower that is, paradoxically, made from violent elemental forces akin to those that can buckle and shape the earth.

A testament to the way in which energy can be harnessed and transformed, and the effects of time, *Full Stop* was formed and sat on the foreshore at Wellington's Balaena Bay, where the steel rusted under salt spray until it was removed in 1990.

The visual presentation that accompanies the drawings shows a sequence of photographs taken by Jurgen Weibel and Nicholls in 1982 to recreate the making of *Full Stop*.

PETER NICHOLLS

Woodbook (Segment) 2001-2

Walnut

Collection of the Artist

In *Woodbook (Segment)* numbers count the passing of years and words equally mark the exploration of ideas, works, exhibitions and journeys as milestones in an artistic career. The artist presents much of his life as an open book, in wood – that organic material so central to his oeuvre.

British sculptor David Nash, who is internationally renowned for working with wood, is one of Nicholls' major influences. In fact, Nicholls corresponded with Nash in the late seventies and met him in England in 1989. The elemental properties of wood are captured in one of Nash's untitled poems:

damp and dry
burnt and buried
wood is given
we do not make it
in air it cracks
in fire it burns
in water floats
in earth returns

PETER NICHOLLS

Cut 1995-6

Walnut and copper

Collection of the Artist

The undulating *Cut* explores the continual shaping of the earth's surface through the upheaval of tectonic plates, the flow of rivers and the making of roads. With its inlaid lifeline of copper, it speaks not only of the line of a journey and the continuation of life, but also of physical roadways and information highways that create networks and shape our natural ecosystems.

Cut is also a horizontal slice through space and recalls the ideas of the American minimalist sculptor Carl André, known for his grounded linear sculptures, which could be as simple and striking as a long single line of bricks. For André, using readymade materials became more important than his previous practice of cutting or carving. For Nicholls, however, the act of cutting, and the visible marks he makes, are an integral part of his approach and identity.

PETER NICHOLLS

Te Henui Pa Working Drawing I 1981

Pencil on paper

Collection of the Artist

Te Henui Pa Working Drawing II 1981

Pencil and photocopy on paper

Collection of the Artist

Not all ideas developed on paper materialise as sculpture. This is especially so for large site-specific works such as those proposed for Te Henui Pa in New Plymouth and the BNZ building in Wellington. The former was done at the invitation of a public art museum; the latter was completed as part of an open sculpture competition to celebrate the bank's newly opened thirty-storey building. Nicholls came close to materialising his towering BNZ-inspired sculpture – he was one of two artists shortlisted and the model of his proposed sculpture was acquired for the BNZ's art collection. If realised, Nicholls' sculpture of steel beams, cables and boulders would have been one-eighth of the building's height, or 13 of its 104 metres.

PETER NICHOLLS

Luff Maquette 1988

Mixed wood

Collection of the Artist

Passage Maquette 1989

Wood and brass

Collection of Te Manawa Art Society.

Courtesy of Te Manawa Museums Trust

Maquettes or small-scale models allow Nicholls to consider the structure and form of a sculpture and imagine it life-sized in its intended environment.

The *Luff* maquette followed a series of sketches of yacht rigging and sails responding to the wind. Nicholls carved undulating sweeps into successive strips of wood to emulate sails flapping while losing wind – what is known, in sailing terminology, as luffing. These dynamic sail-like forms were continued in *Passage*, proposed for the grounds of the Manawatu Art Gallery (now part of Te Manawa) in Palmerston North. Although *Passage* was never made, *Luff* is an imposing 7-metre tall sculpture sited north of Auckland on the crest of a sea-facing grassy ridge backed by native bush.

PETER NICHOLLS

Arch 1983

Matai

Collection of the Artist

Arch is more than a monumental archway. It is also an allusion to the flexibility of the spine and a nod towards American minimalist sculptors who, in the words of Donald Judd, were interested in putting 'one thing after another'. Nicholls is referring directly to Richard Serra's free-standing *Stacked Steel Slabs*, Judd's regularly-spaced wall-mounted stacks of identical galvanised iron boxes and Carl André's bricks laid end to end, side by side and on top of each other. But Nicholls goes beyond the purely minimal to embrace the figurative, the handmade and the organic. He connects, stacks and twists similarly shaped building blocks of matai to intensify the spectator's awareness of gravity and the feeling that, as Nicholls intended, 'the whole thing might fall over'. Only one person can pass through the arch at a time, twisting their spine to emulate the sculpture itself.

The taller, larger and more actively twisting *Spine*, completed three years after *Arch*, further explores bodily movement and verticality. Originally placed outside the Auckland City Art Gallery, it now stands outside the Auckland War Memorial Museum. The fanning out of its blocks as it reaches its height hints at later sculptures such as *Toroa*, on Dunedin's waterfront, which embody what Nicholls calls 'wing essence'.

PETER NICHOLLS

River Crossings 1990

Elm, southern rata, bronze and copper

Collection of the Artist

In 1844 Nicholls' missionary great-great-grandfather, the Reverend Richard Taylor, made a historic journey on horseback around the west coast from Wanganui to New Plymouth and back through virgin bush, using Maori tracks never before traversed by Pakeha. It was not an easy journey – it rained constantly, the terrain was tortuous and there was often little shelter along the way.

Crossings depicts Taylor's journey around the sweep and length of the Taranaki Bight. The smooth vertical sections of English elm speak of Taylor's ecclesiastical pursuit of order when faced with the chaos of a wild and unknown landscape. By contrast, the wild driftwood laterals of southern rata represent the many swollen rivers he and his party had to cross, often with threat to their lives.

The juxtaposition and interconnection of native and introduced wood also speaks of crossing from untamed wilderness to colonisation and from one culture to another. Such mental and philosophical traversals were central to Nicholls' 1992 touring exhibition *Crossings*, which caused critic John Scott to write: 'This perhaps is the ultimate crossing, the realisation that people and their cultures must live with each other and that humanity must live with nature, not dominate it'.

Inlaid objects refer to the tools and artefacts of the journey and Nicholls' inlaid lifeline of copper marks Taylor's achievement and, as with *Cut*, evokes more personal journeys.

PETER NICHOLLS

Whanganui 1990

Totara, rimu, poplar, willow and various objects
Sarjeant Gallery, Te Whare O Rehua Whanganui

Whanganui traces the Reverend Richard Taylor's journey up the Whanganui River from Putiki to Pipiriki. Like the river depositing itself in silt, it lays down personal histories in what Nicholls calls 'a kind of visual poem on the spirit, or wairua, of the river'. The wairua of Nicholls' family is also present in the artefacts and symbols inlaid and inscribed in the work: a river paddle, the shadow of his grandfather's saw, his father's Home Guard water bottle, a compass, a Maori adze head he found within sight of a family grave, and his own axe handle.

It also combines native and imported woods introduced by Taylor himself to evoke the process of biculturalism: Taylor was responsible for making the final copy of the Treaty of Waitangi on parchment and later argued for the rights of Maori whose land was divided and claimed without negotiation or payment. By presenting the river as the embodiment of his family's spirit and their histories as one, Nicholls seems to echo the time-honoured saying of the Whanganui River's tangata whenua: 'Ko au te awa, ko te awa ko au' – 'I am the river and the river is me'.

The radio interview that is being played alongside this work was between Radio New Zealand National's Charles Pierard and Peter Nicholls in 1992, prior to an opening of the exhibition *Crossings*.

PETER NICHOLLS

Korokoro 1990

Cast bronze and forged steel

Collection of the Artist

In *Korokoro* Nicholls has cast a winding piece of rata vine in bronze to trace the shape of a hill the Reverend Richard Taylor climbed to avoid navigating a twisting part of the Whanganui River on his epic journey from Putiki to Pipiriki. The three metal discs mark the points at which he rested.

PETER NICHOLLS

Transcendence 1998

Southern rata and brass

Collection of the Artist

Nicholl's great-grandfather the Reverend Richard Taylor joined the ministry aged thirteen when his father died, his mother having previously died of consumption (tuberculosis). According to critic John Scott, Taylor's appreciation of the frailty and uncertainty of life was central to his choice of vocation; and this would only have been reinforced when he was faced with the inherent risks of colonial life.

Transcendence, made by Nicholls in response to a death in his own family, is an acknowledgement of death but also a symbol of the life that continues from generation to generation.

PETER NICHOLLS

Equivocal Values Sketch 2002

Pencil on paper

Collection of the Artist

Over late December 2002 to early January 2003, Nicholls took part in the *Co-Incidence Project: Redefining Project* dedicated to redefining the 'sculpture symposium'. Focused on artistic practice in the environment, it encouraged expansive and adventurous work free from the established conventions of 'nature' or 'environmental' art.

Equivocal Values: to speak with conflicting voices was a performance piece in which Nicholls burned three gorse bushes that had been dug up, roots and all, and suspended on steel tripods. He also recovered his buried ceramic gorse seeds from under the stubborn-to-burn plants. Nicholls was drawing attention to the tenacity and persistence of gorse. The seeds, which explosively bursting pods can scatter to a density of 11,000 per square metre, can lie dormant for as long as thirty years. When unwittingly unearthed during land clearing they then germinate en masse.

PETER NICHOLLS

Shields for the Process 1998

Brass and forged steel

Collection of the Artist

The arcs of Nicholls' *Canopy* series speak of regeneration and protection, and this is made explicit in the title of this later work, *Shields for the Process*. Here Christian symbols of life replace delicate patterns of foliage as Nicholls calls for healing of New Zealand sculptor, performance artist and photographer Di ffrench (1946–99). The hawk in the centre stands for ffrench, who was once told that she had 'the eye of the hawk'.

PETER NICHOLLS

Rhapsody 2005

Locally dyed Korean fabric, temporary installation,
Munie Village, South Korea
Digital prints: Dunedin Public Art Gallery.
Photographs by Peter Nicholls

In 2005, Nicholls' sylvan sensibility and interest in nature as protector and protected, was quietly and elegantly expressed in the temporary work he created for the Nine Dragons International Festival in South Korea. In *Rhapsody* trees were wrapped in locally dyed fabric so that they took on the guise of cloaked monks, or sentinels, dedicated to the simple grace and beauty Nicholls observed in the traditional Korean women's *hanbok* costumes.

PETER NICHOLLS

Sinew 1985

Stained kamahi

Collection of the Artist

As with other works Nicholls made in the 1980s, such as *Arch* and *Spine*, *Sinew* alludes to the human body. Unlike them, however, it mostly tracks along the ground, directly relating the human body to the land. The clearly visible adze marks that describe the bodily effort of the sculptor could also describe the contours of the land's surface. It is as if Nicholls is linking the very stuff that holds the human skeleton together, and is the source of human strength, to the underlying tectonics that hold and shape the earth. A central archway is formed in the centre of the work as two uprights almost join. Nicholls is referring back to *Arch* as well as exploring his notion of 'the charged gap', where the inherent energy of the piece continues through the space as if closing a circuit.

PETER NICHOLLS

Constrictions 1980

Iron bark, steel and lead

Collection of the Artist

In *Constrictions*, Nicholls obsessively binds and contains nine sections of hardwood logs. He has capped their ends with steel and poured toxic lead into any fissures and cracks. By constricting his objects with steel Nicholls is replicating the relentless process of colonisation, as a Maori Stone Age culture is subjected to a European or Pakeha metal tool culture. And by 'killing' the wood with lead, Nicholls is commenting on the improper use of natural resources, and overlogging in particular. But, paradoxically, he produces dense, powder keg-like objects to remind us that nature is ultimately more powerful than man and that the abuse of these resources can have unforeseen and deadly consequences.

PETER NICHOLLS

The Bridge to Nowhere 1991

Forged steel

Collection of the Artist

The Mangapurua Valley, which follows the stream of the same name, a tributary of the Whanganui, has a rich history. After the First World War the remote valley was opened up as a rehabilitation settlement for returned servicemen. The forest was cleared to make farmland, but because of such problems as difficult access, erosion and poor stock prices during the Depression of the 1930s, the settlement was abandoned. The Bridge to Nowhere, which is the subject of one of Nicholls' wall works, is a concrete and steel bridge that was built too late to make settlement feasible. Only trampers use it today. It is New Zealand's foremost monument to the government-provided marginal land that defeated so many returned men.

PETER NICHOLLS

Musa 2002

Manganese steel, stainless steel, gold leaf and
tanalised pine
Collection of the Artist

Between 1991 and 2001 Nicholls owned 22 hectares of land in the Silver Peaks area of coastal Otago. His efforts in eradicating gorse to reclaim the area for native forest became a kind of sculpture-in-action as well as the inspiration for his studio and site-specific works.

In works such as *Musa*, Nicholls venerates regeneration and renewal and nature's ability to shield and protect those who discover its balance. In *Musa* Nicholls has reclaimed two discarded and worn manganese steel ore-crusher mantles to create an altar to the regenerative energy of nature. With one mantle inverted as a base, and the other on top, it is reminiscent of an ancient holy chalice. The 'cup' of the piece is a cradle for a polished stainless steel ball, a 'pearl' that represents 'order in chaos' and 'shelter from adversity'.

PETER NICHOLLS

Grip 2002

Swamp kauri and cast aluminium
Private Collection, Auckland

Lock 2002

Swamp kauri and cast aluminium
Collection of John Leng, Dunedin

Leap 2006

Swamp kauri and cast aluminium
Courtesy of Connells Bay Centre for Sculpture
and the Artist

Implant 2002

Swamp kauri and cast aluminium
Courtesy of Connells Bay Centre for Sculpture
and the Artist

The *Synthesis* series, with its interlocking pieces of native swamp kauri and aluminium-cast gorse, explores the duplicitous nature of gorse and its role in the regeneration of native forest. An insidious and persistent weed that has displaced native growth, gorse is also a nitrogen-rich nursery crop for native trees that spring up to escape its canopy. In these works Nicholls recognises that biodiversity, and by extension the tolerance of other cultures, has become central to survival.

PETER NICHOLLS

Canopy 1993

Canopy 1993

Lungs 1993

Canopy 1991

Flock 1991

Recyclic 1991

Forged steel

Collection of the Artist

In the *Canopy* series, the concentric arcs of delicately perforated steel cast the shadows seen in a native forest. The shadowy canopy is a protective layer, its arcs shields for protection.

PETER NICHOLLS

Probe Series Working Drawing 1972

Crayon and felt pen on paper
Collection of the Artist

Tomo Drawing (Towards End of Work)

Tomo, Preliminary Concept Drawing #2 From Site

Tomo Drawing (Top Ribbon)

Tomo, Preliminary Concept Drawing #1

all 2005

Watercolour pencil on paper

Courtesy of Connells Bay Centre for Sculpture

Tomo Working Drawing (Spring System)

2005

Pencil on paper

Collection of the Artist

Drawing is part of Nicholls' process of discovery and adaptation. Ideas developed in this form years ago are still relevant today. The early *Towards Probe* drawing presents the idea that trees and their limbs are simple and elegant sculptures made by nature and available to the sculptor. In the final works, poised laterals of wind-fallen branches extend from central uprights like slender balletic arms reaching beyond the normal confines of space to rest on the ground beyond. Since then, elongated linear forms have continued to appear in Nicholls' work, such as *Tomo*, often as references to rivers, or roads.

PETER NICHOLLS

New Land III 1975

Totara and steel

Collection of the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki,
purchased 1976

Nicholls' farming background and his interest in the efforts and resourcefulness of the colonists were explored in his *New Land* series of the 1970s. Inspired by the functional beauty of a metal plough, in these works he joins wood and steel parts, chains and cables to evoke a culture that was committed to hard toil and relied on implements to work the land. But the series also draws attention to the destructive potential of a mechanised culture. Ultimately, however, *New Land* speaks of the profound connection between the land and its people, which is fundamental to human survival.

In *New Land III* the almost mechanical construction of the sculpture is merged with its allusion to landforms, its tensioned cables seeming to connect its parts. This is no allegory of happy coexistence, however, but a reminder of the precarious balance that is struck as industry and land shape each other.

In the three nearby metal wall works Nicholls is exploring the idea of surveying and dividing land. In *Wishbone*, forged steel bands representing strips of land have been woven to mimic the process of land allocation and create a structure unified by the overwhelming drive for ownership.

The nearby *New Land XII*, follows on from *New Land XI*, seen at the beginning of this exhibition. Nicholls embeds a pick-axe to symbolise the end of colonialism and to recognise the energy exchanged between pioneers and the land they worked.

PETER NICHOLLS

New Land XI 1977

Jarrah, axe handle and scythe blade
Private Collection, Auckland

PETER NICHOLLS

Towards Luff 1988

Pencil on paper
Collection of the Artist

'Luff', Whangaparoa Peninsula 1989

Pencil on paper
Collection of the Artist

PETER NICHOLLS

'Luff', Private Collection 1989

Pencil on paper
Collection of the Artist

PETER NICHOLLS

**Passage Proposal, Manawatu Art
Gallery I - IV 1989**

Pencil on paper
Collection of the Artist

PETER NICHOLLS

**Manawatu Art Gallery Sculpture
Proposal. 'Passage', 1989 1989**

Pencil on paper
Collection of the Artist

PETER NICHOLLS

Crossing 1991

Forged steel
Collection of the Artist

PETER NICHOLLS

Pool I 1991

Forged steel

Collection of the Artist

PETER NICHOLLS

Tributary 1991

Forged steel

Collection of the Artist

PETER NICHOLLS

Pool II 1991

Forged steel

Collection of the Artist

PETER NICHOLLS

5 Hills with Fire 1991

Forged steel

Collection of the Artist

PETER NICHOLLS

Landscape 1991

Forged steel

Collection of the Artist

PETER NICHOLLS

Wishbone 1991

Forged steel

Collection of Ann and John Hercus, Christchurch

PETER NICHOLLS

New Land Working Drawing 1976

New Land Working Drawing 1976

New Land Working Drawing 1975

Pencil on paper

Collection of the Artist

New Land Working Drawing II 1975

New Land Working Drawing I 1975

Pencil on paper

Collection of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki,
purchased 1976

PETER NICHOLLS

New Land XII 1977

Mahogany and pick axe

Collection of Cyril Wright, Waiheke Island

PETER NICHOLLS

Engulf 2002

Swamp kauri and cast aluminium

Courtesy of Connells Bay Centre for Sculpture

Wedge 2002

Swamp kauri and cast aluminium

Courtesy of Connells Bay Centre for Sculpture

Tandem 2002

Swamp kauri and cast aluminium

Courtesy of Gary and Erin Clatworthy

Resolution 2002

Swamp kauri and cast aluminium

Courtesy of Connells Bay Centre for Sculpture
and the Artist

PETER NICHOLLS

The Bridge Before the Bridge to Nowhere 1991

Forged steel

Collection of the Artist

PETER NICHOLLS

BNZ, Wellington,

Working Drawing I - VI 1983

Pencil on paper

Collection of the Artist

PETER NICHOLLS

Spine (preparatory Drawing No. 3)

1995

Pencil on paper

Collection of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki.

Gift of the artist, 1986