

BEN PEARCE

#PaperPalsAotearoa

ON FOLDING

Origami seems like one of those things for which the pandemic might have brought about a bit of a renaissance. Like baking bread, it's sufficiently manual and twee, maybe a little nostalgic, and a crane in red floral paper would look nice on an Instagram feed, which seemed to be the essential criteria all new hobbies have had to meet over the past years. Pretty things for the hands to do. And a row of cranes in red floral paper to ornament the windowsill seems a nicer thing to have made of the days, strange units of time even stranger than usual, than a throng of sticks straight and spaced uniformly, gouged into the wall like a forestry block in miniature, as would be the captive's habitual way of keeping their accounts.

With all the fidgety pastimes they kindled, lockdowns, in their forcible way, initiated the apotheosis of what Hannah Arendt named in her 1957 book *The Human Condition*, "modern enchantment with 'small things'" or, "the art of being happy amongst small things, within the space of their four walls, between chest and bed, table and chair, dog and cat and flowerpot," an inventory to which we might add our row of origami cranes on the windowsill, a buffer between the four walls and all the sweet small things it contains, and the space beyond them, a space that suddenly felt much too large, and full of much too large, disenchanting, contagious things.¹

There is a virtue to this kind of happiness—in the drive to construct for one-self, in one's home, in Arendt's words, "the world's last, purely humane corner," to construct comfort and intimacy where it is in other ways being obstructed, and in keeping one's hands busy to do so. This is the virtue of making-do, of using whatever materials are ready to hand and to dig into the potential expansiveness and creativity of one's own inner-world. It is also to assert the necessity of making, or as Kim Paton wrote in April of 2020, that "to commit to a small, creative action, however inconsequential to bigger existential things, feels right now humane and essential."²

#Paper Pals Aotearoa is an homage to these small acts, and what they collectively amount to. Sitting atop of their plinths in their picture-book colours on the busy Te Papa forecourt, Ben Pearce's origami creatures gather up in their folds of corten steel all of the gestures made in homes around the country by thousands of pairs of hands staying busy, giving due, monumental scale to all the stitching, kneading, welding, folding, fiddling that took place. My own lockdown featured several video calls to my mum, phone held between my chin and chest as I held my knitting needles up to the camera trying to show her the stitch I'd dropped, hoping she could tell me how to fix it. She always could, and even though I had messed up the gauge from the start and the vest ended up unwearably narrow, I still keep it fondly in my drawer as a record of the effort, and of those video calls with mum, when she'd patiently examine my progress before showing me her own projects with all their perfect purls.

These gestures are an appropriate thing to memorialise where it is otherwise inappropriate to already be speaking of memories; appropriate when we don't yet have the comfort of affixing 'post-' to the pandemic experience, but are just now, and probably for a long while still, taking measure of its more painful effects, and reemerging each from our respective corners, trying to relearn what Arendt might call the art of being happy despite the big things.

Because for all its virtue, an 'enchantment for small things' easily circuits around to something more anxious, to a voice that says, if my corner is the last, purely humane corner, then the rest is, by default, impure and inhumane. Thinking through togetherness once again, on altogether new terms, we would be wise to push back against that default, and wise to keep in mind Arendt's account of public life as what "gathers us together yet prevents us from falling over each other."³ The challenge at present is trying to work out how to be gathered together without falling over one another, but also without recoiling from one another, and retreating to cosy corners and compulsive crafting.

Origami, as much as it is here a charming and playful offering to this public thoroughfare, can be instructive in this. Its memory, according to Robert Lang, master origami artist, is what makes paper special; paper, he says, will remember past folds but still consent to fold the other way.⁴ Folding inwards and outwards, here then there, is what makes possible the piece of paper's infinite transformations into impossible shapes and creatures.

Creases made and then unmade form the inner structure of the origami figure. While we might be tempted to see it as being all neat corners jabbing at the air in the precise, pantomime geometries of paper pretending to be a wing or beak or spike (or of galvansied steel pretending to be paper), the final creation is the outcome of a chain of opposing manoeuvres made by dextrous, patient fingers and dextrous, patient material.

And so while we equally might be tempted to feel only the abiding pressure of the initial fold, of the heavy knuckle that ran itself around the perimeter of home, seemingly to seal us there, or the ways in which we tucked ourselves into those homes, the next thing to do is fold outwards again into public life. How we might do so while retaining a sense of our bedrooms, balconies, backyards and kitchen tables as creative spaces, and of our hands as creative forces, is the question—but one which Pearce's sculptures affirm might actually come naturally to us, as if by muscle-memory.

1. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press (1958), 52.
2. Kim Paton, "While the creative sector hurts, the power of making carries us through," *The Spinoff*, April 18, 2020.
3. Arendt, 52
4. In Susan Orlean, "Life Lessons in Origami," *The New Yorker Radio Hour*, May 29, 2020.

CONNIE BROWN



The 4 Plinths Sculpture Award

The Wellington Sculpture Trust, with the Collin Post 4 Plinths Project, has made a departure from permanent to temporary public art, and for the past 16 years has showcased New Zealand sculptural practice with biennial installations. The aim of the project is to foster art, artists and audience interactions, and to provide an opportunity for established and emerging New Zealand artists to work in the area of large-scale public sculpture.

The Trust acknowledges with warm appreciation the Post family who gift the \$50,000 award, Wellington City Council and the Public Art Fund, as well as the support of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa and Seresin Wines.

The Work: #PaperPalsAotearoa

#Paper Pals Aotearoa, is four larger than life origami-like animals which sit on each of the four plinths. The work talks to today's environment, the treatment of wild life, the relationships between continents, and our need to co-exist with other life forms – we need to find a balance. Ben's work often explores memory and childhood. These figures play to his love of origami and the animals we have all enjoyed in our childhoods. It provides a playful approach for all ages to enjoy on this site.

The Artist: Ben Pearce

Ben is a sculptor based in Hawkes Bay and works with wood, stone, metal and found objects. He graduated a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 2003, majoring in sculpture at Whanganui Quay School of Fine Arts and has exhibited regularly in New Zealand and Australia since.



wellington sculpture trust

The Wellington Sculpture Trust was established in 1983 to enrich Wellington through sculpture and public art. The Trust commissions contemporary public sculptures of the highest quality, supports the creative arts in New Zealand and gives artists the opportunity to make large scale public works. It also aims to make contemporary sculpture accessible to as large an audience as possible and to increase knowledge of New Zealand contemporary artists working in this art form. To this end the Trust has commissioned 28 permanent sculptures around the City and the Botanic Gardens over the past 39 years.

The Trust is an independent voluntary organisation, with an established expertise in commissioning public art. It works in partnership with the Wellington City Council and other parties and raises funds through the generous support of individuals and Wellington businesses.

Wellington Sculpture Trust trustees:

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Ben Pearce, *#PaperPalsAotearoa*, 2022
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