

The Wellington Sculpture Trust

The Wellington Sculpture Trust was established in 1983 to enrich Wellington through sculpture and public art. The Trust commissions quality, contemporary public sculptures, supports the creative arts in New Zealand and gives artists the opportunity to make large scale public works. It makes contemporary sculptures accessible to as large an audience as possible, 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 37 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 from trusts, Wellington businesses, and individuals through donations and sponsorship arrangements.

Wellington Sculpture Trust Trustees:
Sue Elliott (Chair), Ray Ahipene-Mercer, Nick Barratt-Boyes, Jane Black, Ruth Harley, Helen Kedgley, Julian Ludbrook, Neil Plimmer, Ross Steele.

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The 4 Plinths Sculpture Award

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

The Trust acknowledges with warm appreciation its major sponsors, 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 Artist: Yolunda Hickman

Yolunda Hickman comes from a painting background and her work takes an interest in the contemporary nature of images—how we're surrounded by them and how we try to deduce meaning. Yolunda has exhibited extensively throughout New Zealand, is a Doctoral candidate at The University of Auckland and a lecturer at Whitecliffe.

The Work: *Signal Forest*

Signal Forest is a thicket of entangled images on each plinth. Based on stencil motifs, the simplified shapes depict a range of animals, plants, transportation, technology, and cultural items. These shapes are then applied with a pattern or image drawn from the collection and archives of Te Papa Tongarewa, further entangling forms and the boundaries of classification and meaning.

Signal Forest: Yolunda Hickman's 4 Plinths

Dolphin, aeroplane, dress.

In 1993 Microsoft launched "Encarta," a digital multimedia encyclopedia. I think I first encountered it around 1996. It had to be loaded up from a whirring CD-Rom.¹ When the icon was clicked it had the most amazing audio introduction, there were sounds like the fairy-godmother's wand, African choirs, jazzy trumpets and famous American orators. It felt like the world was unravelling before my eyes. Previously I had used hallowed sets of Encyclopædia Britannica or else the Bateman New Zealand Encyclopædia for researching school projects. Encarta meant that I could find information on a computer. There were articles on any topic I could think of as well as images and other media; maps, audio-tracks, animations and short videos. My brothers and I would scroll through it for hours with glee. There was even a sort-of fun trivia game called MindMaze. Encarta was discontinued in 2009, it was no match for the power of Wikipedia or Google image searches, though the online dictionary held on until 2011.

Crescent-moon, camel, satellite, bird.

Yolunda Hickman's colourful sculptures remind me of such things. Stencilled shapes, ruling margins, homework projects, protractors and lettering books. Carefully-drawn headings in bubble-letters on posters. Pencil then pen, coloured pencils and felts. Tiled and tessellated desktops for early versions of Windows. A kind of innocent and earnest search for knowledge. Thanks to the internet I can now search the museum collection of Te Papa online whenever I please. Mostly I use it to search for images of artworks but often I get distracted by sepia-toned colonial photographs, weathered old flags, taonga in pounamu, art deco fabrics or pressed and flattened botanical specimens. The colourful vinyl on Hickman's plywood forms has been covered with images taken from Te Papa's collection. A rainbow-iridescent beetle shell, kaleidoscopic tivaevae, 1950s kitchen wallpaper, the speckly surface of an Auckland Island Snipe egg.



Penguin, pterodactyl, seal, ship.

A signal is a kind of sign. In the imaginary city of Tamara, sign-boards jut out from the walls. As described by Marco Polo to the Emperor Kublai Khan, each wooden sign is hand-painted with images that mean other things: pincers announce the house of the man who pulls out teeth, a picture of a tankard hangs outside the tavern, scales mark the grocer's.² Other signals indicate what is allowed, such as watering zebras, playing bowls or the burning of corpses. In this case an image, sign or thing is a sign of another thing. Each of Hickman's shapes bear the images of something else. An aeroplane is patterned with tentacles from a colossal squid. A seahorse is covered in German embroidery. An image is the sign of another image. From a distance, Hickman's jumbled shapes are impossible to read, like scribbly dark outlines. Closer up they are a cacophony of colours, patterns and designs yet they are also see-through, you can see the sea or the city behind them. They are entangled and intertwined like a thicket of thorny vines or the criss-crossing branches of a forest.

Pony, helicopter, tulip, truck.

A forest thick with images, so intricately entangled that it is difficult to see. It seems as though such a forest should be humming with vibrations, whispers and barely audible sounds. Quite a contrast to the fairy-tale forest of Sleeping Beauty. Science-fiction novelist Ursula Le Guin remembered a pop-up version of the book in which a thorny paper rose hedge leapt up around the little paper castle.³ Of course this rose hedge is actually the gardens of the castle which have grown wild with no one to tend them. All the gardeners, servants, cooks and courtiers sleep in sympathy with the enchanted princess. This "birdsong wilderness" of unkempt vegetation grows and grows, even the cats and mice sleep while birds fly over the forest singing and passing on. Yet there is something about the density of this tangled, thorny, over-grown, hedge-like forest that reminds me of Hickman's sculptures. They also contain multitudes within them. Captured, suspended or almost frozen upon them are a whole host of stories, species and artefacts. Each has been reduced to a skin; on slender frames they are so narrow that one can only catch a colourful hint of them.

Butterfly, panther, giraffe, daffodil, dog.

These playful forms inter-lock higgledy-piggledy like a barrel of plastic toy monkeys. Their cookie-cutter forms are simultaneously full and hollow. There is too much information, it is difficult to make out exactly what all the different shapes are and where exactly all their densely-patterned surfaces have come from. There is a layering and collapse of content that mirrors the sheer glut of images in the world around us. How many images have you seen today? The background on your phone, the painting on the wall, the puzzle on a cereal box, the cow on the milk bottle. The smile on a billboard, the superhero on the back of a bus, the poster on a noticeboard, your own face on an ID card.

Flask, fish, parasaurolophus, scallop-shell.

Hickman's sculptures belong to a time when it is possible to put any image on almost anything. A fern on an aeroplane, a car that looks like a block of cheese, a cell phone that resembles a carton of French-fries. Deep-fake technology means that videos can be created with the face of one person superimposed upon another that is almost seamless. Perhaps this is one reason why there is still something suspicious about images, just as French theorist Roland Barthes indicated in the 1970s. Some people are very cruel about Barthes, considering his ideas old-fashioned. How can anyone trust someone who spent his whole life studying signs and then ended up being run over by a laundry van? I still think he was onto something, pondering the meaning of lurid crayfish and preserved cherries in magazine recipes, the glazed surface of a chicken, the sheen of ices and jellies. Barthes, like Hickman was interested in the many messages each image can contain, some literal and some symbolic. These four sculptures on their plinths are one response to the contemporary clash, instability and surfeit of images we face every day, whether in our immediate surroundings, the museums we visit, the media we read or the devices we carry.

Victoria Wynne-Jones

1. "Encarta." Wikipedia, 2019. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Encarta>
2. Italo Calvino. "Cities & Signs 1." *Invisible Cities*. Vintage Classics, 1997, 11.
3. Ursula Le Guin. "The Wilderness Within: The Sleeping Beauty and "The Poacher." *The Wave in the Mind: Talks and Essays on the Writer, the Reader, and the Imagination*, Shambhala 2004, 109.
4. Roland Barthes. "Ornamental Cookery." *Mythologies*. The Noonday Press, 1972, 78.



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