

Art New Zealand

[CURRENT ISSUE](#) [PREVIOUS ISSUES](#) [SUBSCRIBE](#) [HOME](#) [ABOUT](#)

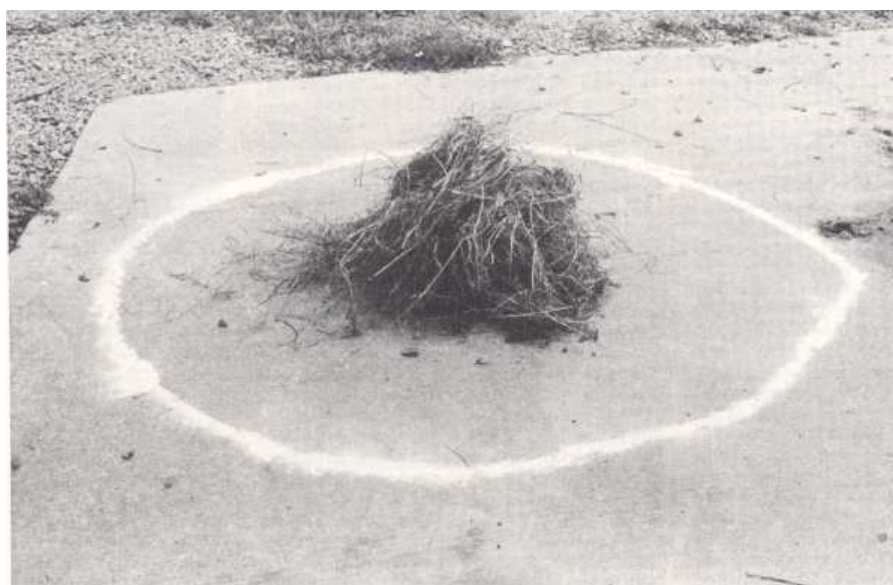


Paul Cullen

RHONDDA BOSWORTH

Paul Cullen comes from a farming background that he describes as 'very pragmatic'. At thirty-two, he supports his family with the furniture-making business that he and his wife, Marilyn Tweedie, began in a backyard shed. His imagination, however, veers compulsively towards sculpture. When reblocking his house he found himself contemplating the underside plane of the floor and studying the organization of the foundations coming up out of the earth.

Paul Cullen gives an impression of calm, intensely-focussed energy. His sculpture is austere, yet rich and poetic. One feels an immediate, literal connection with one's native soil in his images, constructed as they are from such accessible materials as stones, sticks, pieces of glass, string, paper, balsa wood and rag.



PAUL CULLEN *Untitled* 1975
mixed media

Cullen's art is free from the pressures of fashion and commercialism. Although he does exhibit his sculptures in dealer galleries, they are the antithesis of salon art. His often transitory images are offerings for our contemplation: reduced (like a tent) when they are dismantled to mere materials.

In a very simple sense I want everything that's in a work to be there for the reason that it's needed. It's not an ornamentation. It's not there because I thought it looked nice but because it has to be there. It's a matter of reducing the work to its very simplest possible state, eliminating all of the things that lead away from the guts of the work, the thing the work is really about. Anything that's there must build towards its over-all organization and meaning.

Although he drew and painted as a child (and remembers successfully modelling an elephant in clay) Paul Cullen was not drawn specifically towards sculpture until he found himself at art school in Christchurch to fulfil the requirements of a post-graduate diploma in landscape architecture. At twenty-one, excited by the possibilities of creative work for its own sake, he became a full-time art student, graduating eventually with honours in sculpture. This discipline satisfied his need to make things: to work in and with space, to plan and organize something with a direct and physical outcome.



PAUL CULLEN *Transition / Ritual* 1975
mixed media

I did experiment with metal and I found I couldn't work with it at all; I like things that are more immediate, like wood and epoxy resin. The softness of these things is important to me. I like to feel the relationship between the 'high-tech' of something like epoxy resin, and natural materials.

Through studying for a BSc. in botany he has been educated in the ways nature organises herself. He was drawn to anthropological theories of social organization. He was interested in the changes ' that occur through time, and in what is physically manifested in a society as man takes raw materials from his environment and uses and refines them.

For him, both art and science proceed by facing problems and finding their solutions. In every piece I work on, I know there's a result, something to be achieved. When I have successfully resolved as many of its aspects as I can understand, then I think of it as a solution, a resolution, bringing things to a focus.

He is preoccupied with structure and function, on both the physical and metaphysical levels. He feels they permeate society and life, and he seeks to reflect this somehow in his work.

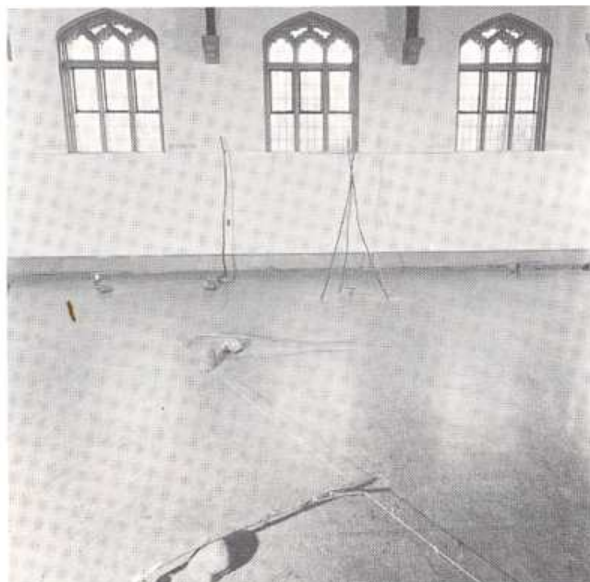
Paul Cullen's art is a system of signs: an evolving, non-static system. His statement *Setting Out/on construction lines* (1981) notes:

Drawn and constructed elements. A transition, a process, method of working. Structure as the mechanism (process) by which means a constructed realization is achieved.

In another statement (1980) he says:

These pieces are structural. My concern is with structure and organization. The formal manifestation is architectural, defining through organizational systems, mapping/plans/setting out. The interface.

Any successful work will be seen to embody something timeless. There will be a logical and simple structural/functional organization within it which forms a whole from the parts, and which leads from one set of ideas to the next. If one part of a system is disturbed, the whole is affected through the complex relationships within it.

PAUL CULLEN *Fishing for Life/Balancing*

Paul Cullen's drawings are an intrinsic part of his creative process. They represent ideas that may or may not be realized three dimensionally. He jots down thoughts as information input, in the form of drawings or written notes. Sometimes he makes a drawing of his work while he is making it, or after he has completed it. He can look back through boxes of drawings and recognize trains of similarly related ideas that emerged subconsciously. His sculpture is the product of an interplay between these ideas, and the process of physically working with materials.

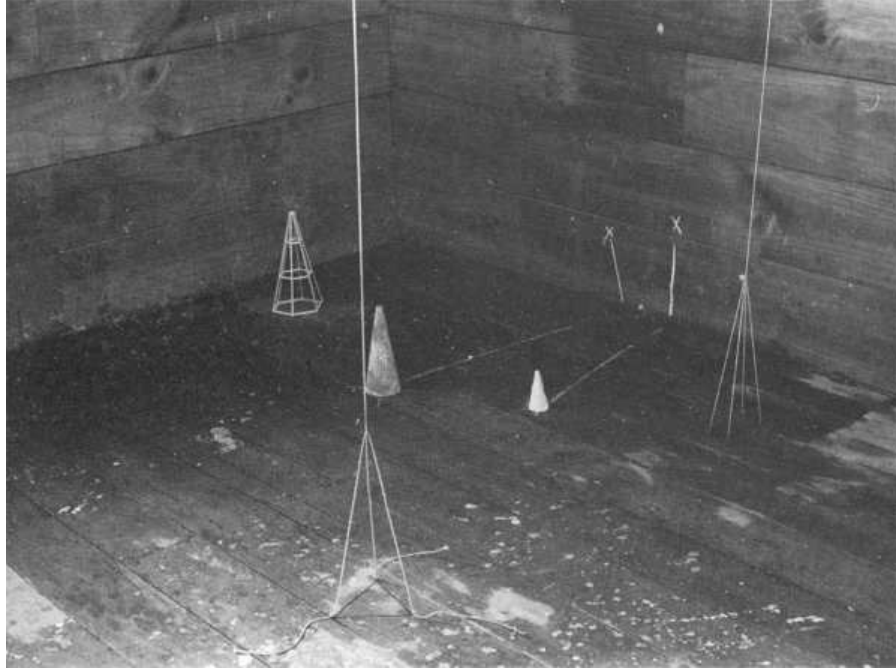
The titles of his drawings and sculptures reveal a poetic sensibility: *The tilting of the sun into the moon (and laughter)*, *Green light / Product of Fall (Failing)*, *Velocity (Becoming a consequence) of action*, *Line, a demarcation (direction / link / continuum) between focus*, *A Conjugation. Love / hate, light / dark, soul / body, nature / culture, raw / cooked.*

Form and materials are affected by environment. The sculptures he made in *Fishing for Life/Balancing* (Centre Gallery Christchurch, 1975) reflected the geography of Canterbury. They were largely horizontal structures, but with some vertical projections. The materials were river stones, string lines, sticks, paper, rag and epoxy resin. When he moved to Auckland, he continued using similar materials but felt he was 'failing back on old solutions'. Tensions within his work reflected his own tensions about having to earn a living, and about coming to terms with the often lonely and difficult process of producing creative work outside the comfortable umbrella of art school.

Changing to balsa wood, line and fine gauze has led to a new means of expressing his ideas. He is now using natural materials in a different way, trying to incorporate them into the sort of structures he is making now. But so far, although he has been 'toying with sticks and lines', it's not working.

He favours austere colour, the natural hues of his materials plus the white of string or the red of mapping-pin tips.

His works are small, because he does not have a large studio space. In *Building Structures* (Barry Lett Galleries 1979) he dealt with larger constructions and one was asked to focus on small details within these. They were fragmentary forms, metaphors for structure. Currently, his small balsa constructions are 'articulations of matter within space'. They imply a larger structure, providing a means of progression and definition within it. Paul is working back to the concept or ideas that gave rise to the structure; and the transition from the idea (or natural thing), to the completed form, where the idea becomes culturalized and physically realized is important.

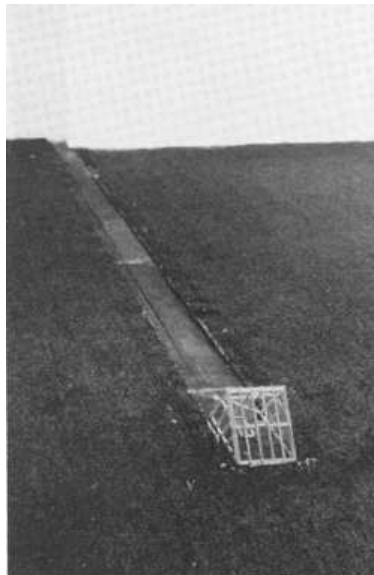


PAUL CULLEN *On Setting Out* 1980
mixed media

These structures are made from processed timber materials, but they are architecture in a raw state, architecture that is just existing as structure and not as building: form that is complete with all the refinements it needs to be functional. The forms are scaled down, obviously not habitable.

The sculpture is about structure, in a skeletal sense, with the skin of later additions removed.

Paul is fascinated by Marcel Duchamp's theoretical, almost scientific approach to art, and the vast amount of written and drawn documentation of works such as *The Bride stripped bare by her bachelors*, even. He wants to communicate with his work, but he knows that, unlike, say, a film-maker or musician, his work will be experienced by very few.



PAUL CULLEN *Building Structures* 1979
mixed media

You have to understand why in fact you're even bothering to do it. If you hope to reach a lot of people and gain fame and adulation like a pop singer, you might as well pack up your balsa wood and spend your evenings watching TV or reading books!

Originally published in *Art New Zealand* 20 Winter 1981

