

GIBBS FARM

KAIPARA HARBOUR, NEW ZEALAND

Seeing the Landscape

Rob Garrett

Commissioning new works rather than buying from an exhibition has the satisfaction of dealing with the artists; and Alan Gibbs comments, 'they're interesting because they're winners; tough, ambitious'.

When Alan Gibbs purchased his Kaipara property in 1991, he already had three decades of significant art collecting behind him. Commissioning art works was in the back of his mind 'but not the major purpose' of searching for a rural retreat. Looking back, it is clear now that 1991 marked the beginning of a whole new art-collecting adventure for Gibbs; and it is one where it has been possible to be very, very ambitious. 'We push the limits,' Gibbs says. 'No sane person would do what we're doing.'

The Gibbs Farm collection started out from Alan Gibbs and Jenny Gibbs' history of collecting mainly paintings which has spanned 30 years and has since further extended what Gibbs admits is 'a fairly developed taste for abstract minimalist art'. Gibbs' sensibility for abstract minimalism has certainly informed the selection of artists for his rural New Zealand project, just an hour's drive north of Auckland, but the land itself has equally shaped the aesthetics of the resulting sculptures, making them one of the most interesting collections of site-specific minimalism.

Together with architect Noel Lane and a highly skilled team of engineers, Gibbs has made a total commitment to an open-brief of commissioning and building major site-specific works from key artists; and as a result, amassing a collection of permanent outdoor sculptures of a scale rarely seen. As indicated here they not only commission new works, but also end up building most of them. And the relationship doesn't always end there; for instance, Gibbs' engineer has continued to assist Anish Kapoor with his subsequent works in London. As such Gibbs and Lane occupy that rare expanded role of collector-producer, a position which increases the stimulation and satisfaction for them.

Gibbs acknowledges that 'the challenge for the artists is the scale of the landscape; it scares them initially' and demands something more from them. One result, though not intentionally, is that the artworks have tended to be

the largest the artists have ever done. In response to the demanding landscape, the artists have pushed beyond what they have previously attempted or achieved. 'Then we end up having to make the works,' says Gibbs, 'and we particularly enjoy the challenge of making something that no one's ever done before and solving the engineering problems to get there.' Nevertheless, while the art is a major source of stimulation for Gibbs, it has to share a place with his amphibian business, the land itself and his wanderlust, which has recently taken him to 160 countries, most by helicopter; and the place occupied by the art at any one time depends on Gibbs' need for a stimulus and whether the proposals under consideration are exciting enough.

After nearly twenty years Gibbs' collection includes major works by Andy Goldsworthy, Anish Kapoor, Bill Culbert, Chris Booth, Daniel Buren, Eric Orr, George Rickey, Graham Bennett, Kenneth Snelson, Len Lye, Leon van den Eijkel, Marijke de Goey, Neil Dawson, Peter Nicholls, Peter Roche, Ralph Hotere, Richard Serra, Richard Thompson, Russell Moses, Sol LeWitt, Tony Oursler and Zhan Wang. Collected at a rate of about one a year (though many take three to five years to develop), most of the sculptures are unique and site specific. The scope, ambition and artistic quality of the Gibbs Farm collection now rivals other major collections and sculpture parks; and in many cases the works surpass major works by the same artists elsewhere. For instance, the Goldsworthy exceeds the scale of his Cairnhead arches; and each of the Serra, Buren and large Rickey are more significant works than their counterparts at Storm King Art Center near New York City. In the case of every commissioned work, the artists have extended themselves rather than change direction, and they have had to do so in the context of a challenging landscape and, in the face of some extraordinary and inescapable competition from the works already commissioned over the years.

A striking characteristic of the whole collection is the tangibility of the way the site itself – the flow of the land, the dominance of the wide flat harbour and the varied assertiveness of the elements – has imposed itself on the artists who have made work for the farm, and subsequently shapes every visitor's experience of each artwork.

The landscape rolls across ridges and gullies and extensive flatlands that have been contoured over the years. But it

is a landscape that is dominated by the Kaipara Harbour, the largest harbour in the southern hemisphere; and it is this body of water which greatly increases the property's sense of scale. The harbour is so vast it occupies the whole western horizon; and it is very shallow, so when the tide goes out, the shallows are exposed for several kilometres and the light shimmies and bounces off it. Equally, it is the forecourt to the prevailing westerly that skims, sometimes vehemently, across the land. Everything in the property flows towards and eventually into the sea; and every work contends, in some way, with the slide seaward.

Walking the land is one of the best ways to experience how each artist has come to terms with the gravitational pull that is exerted on everything, as the mountains roll into hills, slide into gullies and slope down towards the sweeping expanse of the Kaipara Harbour. There is Richard Serra's *Te Tuhirangi Contour*, collecting the volume of the land above and below it; the gravity-defying 'floating compression' of Kenneth Snelson's *Easy K*; and Tony Oursler's *Mud Opera* grasping the final return of all matter to the primordial ooze. Linking these forms is the classical formality of Daniel Buren's *Green and White Fence*, which runs both with and against the land; and the ridge-hugging *Dismemberment, Site 1* by Anish Kapoor, which extends a red eye-ear telescopically out to sea and landward, bridging the inland and coastal aspects of the farm. Finally, in the tidal zone itself, Russell Moses' *Kaipara Waka* and Andy Goldsworthy's *Arches* both embrace the settling sand, rock and mud as well as some sense of a beyond, somewhere else, whether a spirit path, a migratory pattern or the drive to march in loping steps towards a distant horizon.

Other works appear to defy and slip sideways against this pull and flow seawards. The scaled-up brooch-like form of *The Mermaid* by Marijke de Goey leaps playfully across one of the lakes. The facets of Graham Bennett's *Sea / Sky Kaipara* effect disappearing acts in certain lights. The two kinetic works by George Rickey achieve a kind of weightlessness and direct our attention to eddies and blasts of air traversing the land. The works of Peter Roche, Eric Orr and Bill Culbert also float free of gravity's pull through colour, light and wonder.

Hovering somewhere between land and sea is Zhan Wang's *Floating Island of Immortals*. Though not one of the farm's site-specific commissions it epitomises the characteristics of aesthetic minimalism, material virtuosity, and site responsiveness that run like a braided river through the whole collection.

Originally installed on the Belgian coastline at Knokke-Heist, *Floating Island of Immortals* is one of Wang's series of scholars' rocks reproduced in stainless steel.

However, it is different from the artist's earlier works in that the stone that was copied for the sculpture was not large, but a small Lingbi rock, sometimes referred to as a bonsai stone, which Wang has enlarged to create a huge mountain. Lingbi rock is fine-grained, delicately textured ornately shaped limestone which is found in mountain mud deposits in eastern China; though after many years of mining, high-quality Lingbi are now quite rare. Wang's gesture of copying these rocks in stainless steel – the material that is so ubiquitous in corporate and public sculptures – is to traverse two traditions, as rocks have been to the Chinese garden what sculpture has been to the Western park or plaza.

Though *Floating Island of Immortals* is enlarged from a small rock, others in the series made from large stones are created by pounding, bending, heating and moulding sections of stainless steel plate across the complex form of the rock, entirely wrapping it in steel, before peeling the steel away in sections and welding the whole piece together again without the rock inside. Thus reformed as a hollow steel rock, it is polished to a flawless and sometimes mirror finish. The rock comes to both embody the original scholars' rock while at the same time drifting as a disembodied form, as air, or even liquid, due to the play of light across its highly reflective surface. Earth (rock) becomes metal (stainless steel) becomes water (reflection). But the progression does not end there as the work is placed in a pond; thereby the rock-mountain becomes a floating island. Even though real floating islands are not unknown, occurring naturally in places such as Lakes Titicaca, Chad and Loktak, and by inference in present-day Venice; they are also the stuff of mythology, not least in Plato's account of the sinking of Atlantis, and are therefore destinations for the imagination and reflection.

However, nothing much is left to the imagination when it comes to the challenge of solving new engineering problems. Commenting that all of the artists have artistically 'extended themselves rather than change direction', Gibbs could equally be referring to the discoveries they have made in engineering something that hasn't been made before. Consequently, many of the works, as well as being powerful artistic statements, are singular engineering feats.

Eric Orr's *Electrum (for Len Lye)* is perhaps the collection's iconic engineering achievement and art-science collaboration, understated in its inert state; yet visceral and elemental when switched on and generating three million volts of electricity and hurling long snakes of lightning into the surrounding air. The phenomenon that Gibbs asked Orr to aim for, namely a sculpture that would throw 40-foot bolts of lightning, would take two decades to come to fruition; and in the end would be the artist's

last major work. Composed of a sphere of stainless steel hoops atop an elegant four-storey high column, its abstract simplicity deliberately belies its engineering audacity as all of Orr's works seek to 'background the technology' so that the elemental effects are the only things that show. To throw lightning bolts of the magnitude that Gibbs and Orr desired needed the largest Tesla coil ever built, which required high-voltage engineer Greg Leyh and a team of other specialists to achieve something for which there was no precedent; and in the process they developed cutting-edge engineering know-how.

Richard Serra's work also arose from Gibbs' ability to challenge an artist to aim high. Serra recalls their first meeting when Alan 'threw down the gauntlet'. Remembering a visit to Storm King, where Gibbs saw Serra's 'fairly consequential' *Schunnemunk Fork* 1990-91, he said to the artist, 'I want a more significant piece than that. I don't want any wimpy piece in the landscape. If you're going to do something here I want your best effort.'

The engineering achievement inherent in Richard Serra's *Te Tuhirangi Contour* is obscured, as it should be, by its aesthetic presence and visceral power. It is also a work that oscillates between two characters. Viewed from any of the ground above it, the 257-metre steel wall has a delicate quality like a dark ribbon curling, almost floating across the evergreen pastures. One of the features that ensures this impression is the unbroken curving line formed by the top edges of all of the steel plates which are perfectly butted together and engineered so that the whole can expand and contract with sunlight and nightfall without the slightest warp or buckling. The graceful ribbon-like deception is beguiling until one walks nearby and underneath the six-metre-high sculpture. Here the viewer is confounded by an altogether different experience. From the downhill side *Te Tuhirangi Contour* has all the mass of a giant dam filled with water. Each of the 56 steel plates leans out by 11 degrees from the vertical, which is steeper angle than Serra had ever tried before, and which was imposed by the site-specific concept itself: that the line should run at the true perpendicular to the slope of the land. So, seen from below, the materiality of mass and form impose themselves dramatically as something more felt than seen. Serra said that he wanted to create a work that in some way 'collects the volume of the land'; and indeed he has.

Serra and Gibbs agree the work exceeds their anticipation. Gibbs says, 'I'm absolutely thrilled with it. I think it's magic!' Yet the project nearly foundered; not once, but twice in the five years it took to achieve. First there was the impasse. After several site visits and various concepts, the artist and collector settled on one idea. They commenced building a full-scale mock-up in timber and builders' paper in situ. Initially they thought that if they were going to

work in steel they would be limited to five metres high. This was mocked up but did not have enough drama; nor did five-and-a-half metres. It was only at six metres high that the scale worked. 'But Richard didn't know of any steel mill in the world that could form these steel plates six metres high,' so Gibbs suggested he make the work in concrete (as the artist had used concrete before). However, Serra recalled, 'I wanted to build it in steel or not build it at all.' Gibbs and Serra were in a bind. Later, 'Serra found a steelworks in Germany that could do it and he twisted my arm very hard and I decided, alright, it was so exciting that we would do it.'

Then, there was a near disaster. 'Nearly everything here is the biggest art work the artist has ever done.' Therefore, Gibbs shares the challenges inherent in stretching artists beyond their experience: 'We end up having to make the works.' Once made, Serra's 56 computer-designed plates, each weighing 11 tons, were handed over to Gibbs in Germany for shipping to the site and installing. 'The work was designed to be stacked in the ship only ten plates high. In fact, the captain of the ship ignored the instructions and stacked the plates 22 high at which point they fell over, nearly sunk the ship and damaged some of the plates. Every plate had to be individually set up again and re-measured, and most of the plates needed some reworking. Now that took a whole year.'

There is a discoloured band, about half a metre deep, all along the base of Serra's sculpture. This is where sheep have rubbed themselves against the warm steel and left a distinctive patina. It is a high tide mark of the work's sensuality; its attractiveness. The smudge grounds the sculpture in something homely. It is the earthy antithesis of abstract minimalism. Yet it is also perfectly in tune with this place and with the growing collection. The project as a whole encompasses a compelling collusion between the specifics of place, namely attachment and tactility; and the abstractions and ambitions of an international art world, namely mobility and ideas. 'Your best effort' always involves imagining somewhere other than where you are, while paradoxically being acutely aware of where you are.

Anish Kapoor's *Dismemberment, Site 1* is related to earlier, though temporary, installations elsewhere: in the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art and the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall in the UK. But the Kaipara extension has become an intensely different experience because it is conceived for a wild and unconfined landscape. The previous works, *Tarantanrara* 1999 and *Marsyas* 2002, were made to fill the box-like voids of exhibition halls. The expressive and technical scale of the Gibbs Farm experience appears to have born fruit in more recent projects by Kapoor, including the 110-metre long and 50-metre high *Temenos*, the first of five huge projects,

the *Tees Valley Giants*, by the artist and his collaborator, structural designer Cecil Balmond, and in the artist's truly mammoth winning design for London's 2012 Olympic Park, *ArcelorMittal Orbit*.

On Gibbs Farm there is no prescribed space to work within. Rather, there is an undulating plane, far horizons and a wide sky. In response, Kapoor has nestled the work in a cleft cut into a high ridgeline. With views of the harbour to the west and mountains to the east, it is as if he wanted to channel the forces of water, air and rock; and to link the width of the harbour with the height of the hills. The site elevates Kapoor's work into view, but also makes it impossible to be seen entirely from any one position (other than the air).

As its title suggests, *Dismemberment, Site 1* can only be seen in parts, and thus has the effect of parsing the viewer from any expectation that they might be able to contemplate sculpture in the round, as a whole. Composed of a vast PVC membrane stretched between two giant steel ellipses, it has a decidedly fleshy quality. The way the titles and the red membrane of this, and the BALTIC and Tate versions, are a nod in the direction of Greek satyr Marsyas' flayed body, is also suggestive that some things can be conceived, but not seen as a whole. Even climbing to the ridgeline close above it, the sculpture can't be taken in without turning one's head from side to side. Seen from a distance, the landscape gives it a nudge, playing tricks on one's ability to judge size and proportion. But standing close to the eight-storey-high work, it's gigantic, mesmerising character kicks in. During any of the site's frequent westerly winds it takes on a life beyond what Kapoor could ever achieve indoors. One can sense the wind, as one feels the breathing of someone lying nearby. Entering from the west, it doubles in force and its materiality is amplified, as it passes through the narrow waist and out the wide horizontal mouth of the leeward end. The sculpture breathes: expanding and contracting with each gust. Here Kapoor has realised something transcendent within a large sculptural object. It is architectural in scale yet mysteriously visceral and immediate in character.

As discussed with the works by Serra and Kapoor, Gibbs Farm is the perfect environment for what can only be described as a double experience of many of the artworks. On the one hand they can mostly be seen from a distance and their true scale is deceptively disguised by the drama and scale of the surrounding landscape which often out-muscles them. But by walking the landscape and coming

into close quarters with each artwork, one after the other, their own scale and particular character unfolds, until one at a time, each artwork fills your viewing horizon and imagination.

There is one exception: one work exceeds even these viewing possibilities, as there is no vantage point from which to see most of the work, let alone the whole. Daniel Buren worked directly on the first 544 metres of *Green and White Fence* along a single ridgeline and since then the artist's theme has grown to a length of 3.2 kilometres; over time it will become the only form of fence on the property.

Buren has insisted that future fence posts be installed on the true vertical, rather than, as is usual farm fencing practice, perpendicular to the slope of the land. The artist's regime subtly asserts itself on the farm's slopes, making the fall and rise of the land more geometrically apparent to the observant eye. Yet viewers could also overlook the way the fence articulates the actual angles of the land to the perpendicular along the fence line. Additionally, while the fence form may be extended across the farm as and where required, the artist has also stipulated that the stripe motif is oriented consistently in its north-south direction. Both of these requirements transform the functional form of the New Zealand farm fence into something far more classical and formal; and this approach has led to the creation of one of Buren's most distinctive works; it stands to unify the undulating terrain of the property.

It is fitting that the one installation that pays homage to the tidal flats is invisible at times too. Unlike Russell Moses' *Waka*, which slips under the incoming tide, Tony Oursler's *Mud Opera* projections are 'like a vampire; it only comes out at night'. This was Oursler's largest outdoor work at the time and it took him some while to find the optical properties necessary for the video projections to work on the trees and tidal mud of the farm's coastal edges. Finally he did, experimenting with a nest of rubber snakes under a very harsh light which made them pop 'into the air in some funny way and look almost holographic'. While the media chiaroscuro has the forms popping into the air, the motifs are suggestive of evolutionary ebbs and flows, which becomes in Oursler's words 'a metaphor for the unknown and known'.

Like Oursler's projections in the dark on the margins of the land and sea, for viewers walking across Gibbs Farm to experience the growing collection there is 'the feeling that there's always something there on the margin of what you're seeing'.