

## On time, space, and existence

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*Zealandia (At Home)*: Working with a South Island rainforest image by Craig Potton, the ancient stone sculpture emerges from the primordial landscape, rising up like the mist. Image: © Gill Gatfield. Composite Photo: Conrad Morley / Craig Potton Rainforest NZ

New Zealand artist Gill Gatfield has been invited to exhibit in ‘Time Space Existence’ curated by the Global Art Affairs Foundation, at the Venice Architecture Biennale this year. Here she talks about *Zealandia*, the work she produced for the event.



Gill Gatfield with a sculpture model of *Zealandia*.

Photo: Lauren Phillips

## **Why will there be art at the Architecture Biennale?**

**Gill Gatfield (GG):** This is an exciting new move by the Global Art Affairs Foundation (GAAF). For the first time, sculpture will be presented alongside architectural projects in the exhibition 'Time Space Existence'. The curatorial team have selected 30 international sculptors and 150 architects to show across three venues – two palazzos and the Giardini Marinaressa.

The aim is to explore connections and create dialogue between the two disciplines. It will be fascinating to see how this plays out in Venezia, particularly in relation to conceptual content and ideas of beauty. Beyond our shared fascination for materials, form, method and site, contemporary architecture inclines more towards the apolitical, while art can be singularly political. I'm intrigued to see how each project connects with people's hearts and minds.

## **How do you see your work fitting the ethos of the Biennale and/or that of what the Global Art Affairs Foundation (GAAF) is trying to accomplish with this exhibition?**

**GG:** The exhibition themes of time, space and existence, and the 2018 Biennale concept of 'Freespace' echo within my practice. I am especially inspired by the idea of 'Freespace' expressed by Irish architects Yvonne Farrell and Shelley McNamara, the first to curate this major event as a duo. They advocate, "We need to tend to culture, like tending to a garden." These ideas were definitely in the mix that formed the conceptual bones of *Zealandia*.

Using a unique stone sourced from the South Island, the sculpture carries the DNA stamp of time and place. Rather than anchoring it to the past, the stone enlivens the abstract figure. It holds its ground and also seems to move, with richly-veined patterns snaking up the sculpture like muscles or skin, and crystals and mica that shimmer in the sun. This X-figure is simultaneously a text, number and symbol. Its minimalist form speaks a universal language and conveys ideas about humanity and our relationship with the earth.

## **There are some exciting alumni from the GAAF exhibitions... any in particular you admire?**

**GG:** It's an impressive list – Louise Bourgeois, Yoko Ono, Valie Export (see her ground-breaking video *Touch Cinema*), Lee Ufan, Marina Abramovic, Carl Andre, Jannis Kounellis, CF Moller (based in Aarhus, Denmark where I did my artist residency), Antony Gormley, Dan Graham, On Kawara, White Arkitekter Sweden, Vito Acconci, and the Mies van der Rohe Foundation, which is presenting a new project with GAAF again in 2018.

## **You mentioned that you asked a lot of questions of the organisers about the history of the garden where the artwork will be exhibited. Was there anything in its past that ended up being incorporated into *Zealandia*?**

**GG:** Yes, conversations about site selection with GAAF were extensive and well-informed, with detailed plans, videos, landscape architect reports, and 3D models of spaces. The GAAF sculpture curator was endlessly gracious in the face of my need to know more. I chose a particular site where *Zealandia* could be beside the sea and have space to breathe, in the Giardini Marinaressa. I know this garden well – I had gravitated to it on earlier visits to Venice.

My focus was both practical and conceptual – I wanted to understand the substructure of the garden. Venice is like a ship, with timber piers connecting it to the sea floor and Istrian stone that creates platforms for construction. In the Giardini, the ground is only 500mm deep. I took inspiration from the city's history and architecture.

I studied the spatial and natural elements within this public garden. It was originally surrounded by the first Venetian community housing, which faced the merchant ships that plied trade out of the Lagoon, and across the Mediterranean. Large boats still berth on San Marco Canal beside the garden today. The sense of passage afforded an apt context for this stone sculpture from New Zealand. Gardens are a rarity in Venice, and I was intrigued by an observation that early Venetians preferred marble to vegetation. In the buildings of Venice, art was used to recreate nature. Symmetry also plays a large part in Venetian gardens, which were adorned with statues of nymphs and goddesses.

*Zealandia*, which stands 2.3 metres high, combines geometry with the qualities of classical statuary. Mounted on a pedestal made from Italian granite, the perfectly proportioned X-figure appears anthropomorphic, human-like. The deeply-veined stone creates a marbled effect reminiscent of drapery in classical sculpture and especially of the Italian baroque. The name Zealandia evokes Greek mythology. Bracketed by marine pines, open to the water and sunlight, *Zealandia* might present as a modern goddess.



*Zealandia* will sit in the Giardini Marinaressa where it can “be beside the sea and have space to breathe”, Gill says.

### **And the site is also surrounded by some interesting architects, right?**

**GG:** Yes, for six months, *Zealandia* will share space in the Giardini Marinaressa with the National Pavilion of Pakistan, a project by the University of Cincinnati, and a major piece by US/Polish architect Daniel Liebeskind, who designed the Jewish Museum in Berlin and the master plan for the reconstruction of the World Trade Centre in New York. I'm also looking forward to experiencing projects by Kengo Kuma, Odile Decq, Richard Meier and SOM who are also exhibiting in Time Space Existence 2018.

### **What parameters did GAAF give you and how did you approach this invitation?**

**GG:** The brief from GAAF was open. The organisers had looked at my practice and asked me to respond to the exhibition themes of time, space, existence. For artists, these opportunities are gold. There were weighty practical issues like fabrication schedules, tight shipping timeframes, and the costs of the work. When completed, *Zealandia* would fill a 20-foot container, so airfreight was not an option.

My quest to source local rock and make a stone sculpture for Italy raised a few eyebrows. For me, these aspects of the project also express key ideas held within the work – challenging the flow of the stone trade and of art history. The first hurdle was to find the right stone. I even considered a large boulder that blocked a road near Whangamata. With shipping deadlines looming, the Foundation offered to extend my invitation to the next curated exhibition at the 2019 Venice Art Biennale, which offered some comfort. But with tight project management, a highly-focused team and a 24/7 schedule, *Zealandia* is en route to Venezia.

**Your work has often been very site specific... how does this one reflect its origin and its destination?**

**GG:** The specially-crafted Italian granite pedestal, made in New Zealand, is integral to the sculpture. *Zealandia* unites a piece of Italy with a piece of New Zealand. These two ancient stones were formed under distinctly different geological conditions and phases. The New Zealand stone resulted from an upheaval caused by shifting plates, while the Italian stone is a cooled magma, a volcanic rock. Pairing these two expressive materials connects origin and destination on a subterranean level.



The granite plinth work in progress for *Zealandia*.

**And the stone itself had to be cut in China which, in a way, says something about our current globalised manufacturing.**

**GG:** Where possible, I make sculptures close to the source of the materials, aiming for a low carbon footprint. In the case of *Zealandia*, that budget is in deficit! The stone went to Xiamen in China because New Zealand does not have the technology to cut large stone blocks. Globalisation certainly comes into play – on return to New Zealand, the stone was polished using state-of-the-art machinery built in Italy.

From a quarry deep in the South Island, to the island of Venice, via the Indian Ocean and Suez Canal, with a round-trip to China in between – the New Zealand stone will have covered 42,000km. The Italian granite has travelled a similar distance – from Italy to New Zealand and then returned.



The stone, extracted from the South Island, is deeply-veined, creating a marbled effect.

### **How did the name *Zealandia* come about?**

**GG:** The sculpture's title befits its materials and form, the concept and the intended context. Made from a unique stone extracted near the mountains of the South Island, *Zealandia* documents primordial time. With intersecting planes slicing through each other, it mirrors the conflicting earth movements that created this stone millennia ago. From the earth and of the earth, *Zealandia* conveys qualities of fragility, strength and resilience.

It registers the discovery of Zealandia – the 8<sup>th</sup> continent – a submerged landmass with small islands rising up from the South Pacific Ocean. Aotearoa/New Zealand forms the largest of the islands on this newly-minted continent. Like Venice, Zealandia remains in a state of flux, constantly negotiating its relationship with the sea.

Zealandia is also a female symbol dating from New Zealand's colonial history. She is an ambivalent figure whose role has been adapted to the purpose at hand. From a colonial icon, the 'daughter' of Britannia, to a symbol of post-war peace, a supplicant and a warrior, she seems stuck in the past, an image conceived by men. Ignored as a suffrage icon in favour of real women leaders, Zealandia has languished in the museums of cultural iconography. Perhaps now, recast in the sculpture *Zealandia*, this symbolic figure can rise up like the Greek goddess Libertas, heralding change, free.

### **The piece also references Da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*. Can you walk us through some of this?**

**GG:** *Zealandia* intersects artistic canons, in addition to traversing continents and eons. It is baroque and minimalist, classical and futuristic. There are no single points of reference in art history from which it proceeds.

The work can be considered in light of the psychology and socio-politics of form. In terms of beauty and proportion, largely male-defined ideals have set baselines and become the norm. The iconic drawing of

*Vitruvian Man* (circa 1510) by Leonardo da Vinci, which established the canons of proportion and aesthetic foundations of *Renaissance Man*, is literally still in currency – immortalised on the one Euro coin.

In *Zealandia*, I sought to contest this canon. Also a Roman numeral: dieci/ten, the hourglass figure with high waist, slim features and open limbs evokes 10/10, a male-led measure of absolute feminine beauty. Amid global movements demanding gender equality, respect and inclusion for all, *Zealandia* prompts a shift in perception. Encircling the work, it changes from a sensual feminine form into a robust, vertical shaft. It becomes a column, the Roman numeral one, an 'I-figure', a universal gender-free symbol of existence.

*Zealandia* asserts its position in open space, connected to the cycles of nature. Interlocking 'limbs' create an A-frame, a physical cave, and a shelter between splayed 'legs'. Its own X shadow will stretch and shrink with the passage of the sun, reflecting an endless diversity of 'ideal' proportions.

**Could it also be seen as a further exploration of themes you worked on in your 2015 piece, *The Kiss*?**

**GG:** Yes, it does advance ideas explored in earlier works such as *The Kiss* [a four-tonne black granite monolith] and *Native Tongue*, made from ancient kauri, carbon-dated at over 45,000 years old. The rich grain of that timber recovered from the peat swamps of the far North and the veins in the stone of *Zealandia* extracted from the deep South are the organic bookends of a small nation with immense geographical range. *The Kiss* and *Zealandia* adopt opposite starting positions in relation to the abstract X-form, with the former employing reflection and the latter, absorption.

Human interaction with *The Kiss* made a big impact on me and influenced my shaping of *Zealandia*'s upright X form. While on a residency in Denmark, I witnessed countless unmediated responses to *The Kiss*, where visitors – both adults and children – stretched their limbs up and out into an X-form. This led me to question what fuelled this response. Ostensibly, catching their reflections, people were subconsciously mimicking the form of *The Kiss*, a grounded X-figure, on a vertical plane. The scale of the sculpture meant the X-form could only be perceived by encircling the sculpture or when viewing from higher ground. People who approached *The Kiss* at ground level and had not yet seen the X-figure still displayed this behaviour. The X-figure seemed connected to an intuitive impulse to describe the human form in space, an assertion of freedom and presence.

**There is also a reference to female chromosome combination?**

**GG:** X is a biological symbol, the form of the universal female chromosome, shared by all women and men. At midday, the X-figure will replicate on the ground like DNA, casting a shadow that lengthens and shortens with the seasons. In creating the female genetic code XX on horizontal and vertical planes, *Zealandia* generates a blueprint that speaks of the origins of human life.

**Do you envision the piece returning to New Zealand? Where will it end up?**

**GG:** I suspect this sculpture could clock up more miles yet. Like the *Winged Victory of Samothrace*, *Zealandia* might ride the waves at the bow of a ship crossing the Mediterranean.

Read more about *Zealandia* at the 2018 Venice Architecture Biennale [here](#).



Gill Gatfield and Peter Boardman engineering the creation of *Zealandia*

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