



GLASS CEILING (NZ AOTEAROA) 2020

Can you tell us about *Suffragette* and the time it alludes to? The *Suffragette* sculpture reflects the power and poise of 19th Century activists who won the vote for women and the right for women to be legally described as a 'person'. Up until then, women in New Zealand were more or less the legal property of men. There is added meaning in showing this work in Christchurch with its deep history and strong leadership in the women's suffrage movement. It holds the gaze and initiates the conversation, like I

first nation to grant women the right to vote. **You've displayed art in Christchurch before and after the earthquakes, and recently visited the city. How do you think it has evolved, physically and artistically over that time?** When I'm in Christchurch I see a city of warmth, resilience, and creativity. Like others from out of town, I kept getting lost after the earthquakes in the unrecognisable built landscape, and I'm still confused by the one-way streets. But the heart of Christchurch for me feels strong and intact. There is a clear sense of

underpin many of these big art projects. It's a formula for success that other cities across the motu could adopt. **What do you like to get up to in Christchurch?** There are amazing trees beside the Avon and in Hagley Park that create patterns in the sky when lying underneath them, and unexpected treasures in the Canterbury Museum that set my imagination into gear. **How have international audiences responded differently when you display your art overseas?** In Europe, audiences tap into a different art history to ours,



Artist Gill Gatfield's works are exhibited around Aotearoa and the world, including her work *Suffragette* on display in Christchurch at SCAPE's Studio 125 Gallery. She sculpts a narrative of feminism, activism and art with *Cityscape*.

imagine Kate Sheppard and her colleagues did. **You seem to have an affinity for the letter 'I' – what does it mean to *Suffragette*, and your art in general?** For some time now I've been fixated on 'X' too, and there are other letters I'm drawn to. An 'I' asserts human presence; it's a marker of identity. In the *Suffragette* sculpture, the I-figure is human-like and asserts the first person pronoun. It highlights a central tenet of feminism, that the personal is political. It is also a Roman numeral meaning 'one' or 'first', and in this sense, *Suffragette* commemorates New Zealand's leadership as the

direction and community in the creative work here. **How is the Christchurch arts scene different to other cities?** There's something special in the air in Christchurch, a sophisticated rawness, like the old refuses to stifle the new. In a small radius, there's real depth and range in creativity and conversations. I love visiting the galleries and catching up with art friends. For a sculptor, it's like cloud nine, there's an abundance of international quality public art, deftly placed. Christchurch is lucky having SCAPE Public Art and visionary city leaders. SCAPE's collaborations with local industry and iwi

and tend to bring that 'reading' to the work. Audiences in the USA are more inclined to start with minimalism and situate my work in a lineage of conceptual practice. Wonderfully, kids anywhere enjoy the work without needing more. Regardless of place, people want to touch and circle the work. **How did your experience as an equality and diversity lawyer shape your art?** That work grounded me and made me acutely aware of the impact of systems and biases on people. As a result, my artwork, consciously or unconsciously, often includes a strong focus on the first person as



and climate driven projects in which women are properly funded to lead and participate equally? **And what do you hope to see for women's rights in the next decade?** An end to violence against women and equal pay for work of equal value would be a good start. More women in leadership roles across all areas of society and governance, achieving 50/50 to reflect the population, and more youth and diverse leaders committed to equality of outcomes for all, ones which can be sustained and weather the big game-changing events.

a building block of humanity. This comes out in individual strength works like *Suffragette*, and can manifest in collective strength monuments like *Glass Ceiling* (NZ Aotearoa) and *Zealandia*. **Can you have art without activism, or activism without art?** Art can be politically neutral in terms of the artist's intentions, yet be ascribed with political content or context. It depends on the eye and mind of the viewer, and shifts over time. And activism exists without art, but thinking of the posters and slogans of 1960s black American and 1970s feminist movements, art was the imagery that drew people in, or out. Activism is more effective with art in the toolbox. **It's been a big decade for women's rights. What do you see as the let-downs of the 20-teens?** Progress toward equality on a systemic level too often slips and slides in the wake of big events – wars, economic downturns, climate crises, and pandemics. Of the 11,000 New Zealanders unemployed as a result of Covid, 10,000 are women. We still seem myopic in terms of solutions and the infrastructure is too linear and last-century. Why not invest billions in STEM, creative

What attracted you to art? Art is one of the few pursuits that let me work simultaneously with beautiful materials and philosophical or political ideas. To some extent, law reform does this too but in that field the creative tools are confined to words and the ideas need to fit a prescribed purpose. Art gives me immense freedom to explore, go off-piste, dream, invent, manifest, and share. The risks are high but there is reward in the making and in shaping the unimaginable. **And what draws you to the abstract?** For me abstraction is where the fun starts. There's poetry in geometry and physics. **How do you approach exploring detailed themes in a minimalistic way?** Minimalism is an ideal conduit for de-tangling complexity. Layered narratives can be conveyed through singular materials and simple forms. I find these elements in different and unique combinations of materials, form, the process of making, artwork title, context, environment, audience and site. There's no script but there is an endeavour to eliminate distraction and create space for sensory engagement, emotion or thought. **You've used**

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some amazing materials including grass, glass, limestone, granite, and 45,000-year-old kauri. How do you choose your materials? At times I think it's the other way round and my materials choose me. It becomes a bit of an obsession. Most of the materials I use are hidden or hard to find and definitely not easy to work with, needing lots of persistence and patience to wrestle into the shapes I see in them. It's a difficult relationship. There's a high level of trial and error. They don't give themselves up easily until, like magic, at the end they claim their form and meaning as if that was always on the cards but I wasn't in the loop. **What are you working on at the moment?** I am experimenting with scale, from miniatures to monuments. I'm also exploring through my digital sculptures how the sense of touch might evolve



SUFFRAGETTE

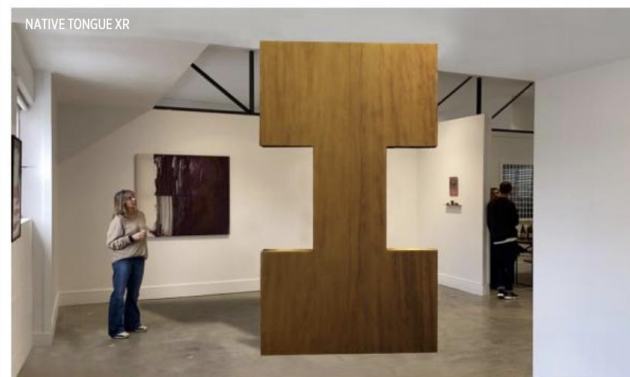
when relocated to the edges of reality. I've been working in extended reality for several years now. My first augmented reality sculpture *Native Tongue AR* was demonstrated at the 2018 Venice Architecture Biennale and launched with CODAworx in New York at A18. I'm expanding this work with the support of Creative NZ and will be presenting it at *Sculpture by the Sea* in Australia and other exhibitions through 2021.

What has been a standout moment of your career to date?

Making my sculpture *Zealandia* was a recent highlight; and exhibiting this work in Venice in a park on the Grand Canal for six months. The light there is dappled and time goes slow. *Zealandia* celebrates the emergence and discovery of the eighth continent – a submerged landmass with small islands rising from the Pacific. It is carved from a rare indigenous rock over 100 million years old. I had a wild idea for the twin planes of striated stone to slice through each other, like clashing tectonic plates. In Venice, the sculpture's geometry rewrites the 'perfect proportions' of Leonardo da Vinci's Renaissance *Vitruvian Man*. Using new ratios, the upright figure outlines the chromosome X, the blueprint of life, DNA universal to all. **If you could invite any three people living or dead to a dinner party, who would they be?** Mary Wollstonecraft, feminist philosopher and poetic writer; Eva Hesse, so we can discuss the ins and outs of sculptural minimalism; and Kamala Harris because the glass ceilings she has untangled make her a leader to follow and watch. **What's your favourite guilty pleasure?** I can't go past Zen Sushi & Dumplings near The Arts Centre. **Is there anyone you would love to collab with?** Where to start? Bridge builders, gardeners, sailmakers, weavers, filmmakers, space scientists. I relish working with technologists, craftspeople and creatives, and anyone open to



GILL WITH MODEL X AND ZEALANDIA (AT HOME)



NATIVE TONGUE XR

'Activism is more effective with art in the toolbox.'

breaking rules to build new things. **What are you reading or watching at the moment?** *The Queen's Gambit* on Netflix – can't beat this strong, witty, and unapologetic chess player and her strategy to win. *My Brilliant Friend* by Elena Ferrante – her beautiful literary style and effortless command of words make books you can't put down. *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* directed by Taika Waititi – brilliant, fun and inspiring, woven with threads of Te Ao Māori revealing

the interconnectedness of all living and non-living things. **Who's your personal hero?** There are many and my list would start with the rangatira, men and women Māori leaders, who signed the Treaty of Waitangi to bring peace to this land. These and other acts of unrivalled generosity I hold in high regard. **What's on the cards for 2021?** I'm exploring new terrain for hidden gems – ideas and rocks for a solo exhibition in Auckland and for sculpture projects that might end up in the public domain. I'm thinking a lot about inclusive monuments and how these can cross borders, connect people and generate cultural exchange. gillgatfield.com