

From the collection



Christine Hellyar (born 1947), *Armllet* 1993, bronze.

Armllets are decorative bands usually worn above the bicep and made from a precious material such as gold or silver. Why then have these three bronze sculptures been given that title?

Based on native plants, fern, palm and flowering flax, they are sited in Grafton Road in a small plot which is formally planted to resemble an eighteenth century European garden. *Armllet* comes from a series of the artist's works which are titled to make reference to the adornments of classical antiquity – amulet, necklet, coronet, diadem. Two of the sets of three stems – *Spray* and *Corsage* – were also titled for the European

tradition of women wearing flowers for special occasions. The three stems that make up *Armllet* are meant to stand as sentinels in attendance upon Mother Nature, and to draw attention to her beauty through their own.

As a group of works, the series that *Armllet* comes from was first exhibited collectively in the winter of 1993, and the work was purchased for The University of Auckland Art Collection the following year.

Christine Hellyar has had a long association with this University. She graduated with a Diploma of Fine Arts (Hons) from Elam School of Fine Arts in 1969, focusing on landscapes and land forms in her sculpture. Endlessly experimental in her practice, she was the first artist to mould her work in latex directly from native flora. By the mid-1980s she had established herself as one of the leading sculptors of her generation. She returned to Elam to teach in the Sculpture Department where she stayed for over a decade. Maintaining an invigorating sculptural installation which now occupies her full-time, she now has commissions in every major New Zealand sculpture park and also installed in many public and private buildings.

In writing to the University in 1994 while still teaching at Elam, the artist drew a plan of where she would like her sculpture sited, commenting that she found the proportions of the small garden at the back of the German Department to be most suitable. She felt that the Grafton Road garden had a contemplative nature, with seating that made it appropriate for the addition of an art work. She also observed that the garden was relatively private.

Writing more recently about her concerns at that time, the artist has identified her principal interest as being in the ways in which humans domesticate the sublime in nature, subjecting the

wilderness to the mowing, pruning and clipping which makes a garden.

Bronze as a material carries historical associations and the artist has used it here knowingly. The great civilisations of antiquity worked in bronze for art, from the time of the introduction of this alloy of copper and tin for edged weapons. Having worked for a long period in rubber, plaster and found materials, Christine Hellyar relished deploying the loaded properties of this metal to contribute to a long tradition of civic sculpture.

“I like the tool and weapon quality of the bronze,” she writes. Ironically, bronze can be both solid and ephemeral. While it seems like a permanent material (in contrast to the biodegradable media the artist has often used) relatively few large ancient bronzes have survived. Many more works in ceramic and stone have come through the centuries, even if only in fragments, as many bronzes were melted down to make weapons in times of war, or to create new sculptures commemorating the victors.

Commemoration is part of the content of this work. Native vegetation has been lost through the process of colonisation, and this is a city where even the Māori names which were based on plants have been replaced. For example, Maungakiekie – mountain of kiekie (*Freycinetia banksii*) – is now One Tree Hill, and like the rest of Tamaki makau rau which has been cleared of its coastal broadleaf forest, few remnants of flora persist to remind us of what has gone.

The artist writes that she likes to think of the three different kinds of plants in *Armllet* dancing together in this European garden – fern, palm and flowering flax united once again as they were in pre-colonial times.

Linda Tyler