

## From the collection



Selected from invited submissions for a new sculpture to adorn the garden at the back of the Kenneth Myers Centre in 2001, Richard Shortland Cooper's design was installed in March 2002.

It required a crane with a long enough reach to carry the sculpture over the four-storey building from Shortland Street.

The street takes its name from Commander Willoughby Shortland (1804-1869) who was New Zealand's first Colonial Secretary from 1841 until he was dismissed by Governor FitzRoy in 1843. His younger brother Edward Shortland, a medical doctor and linguist as well as colonial administrator, wrote books on Māori language and customs.

Richard Shortland Cooper acknowledges his Māori, Aitutaki (Cook Island) and European ancestry, and drew on his cultural heritage as the inspiration for this work. In titling it *Mātauranga*, the Māori word for knowledge, he was making a reference to the siting of the work next to what was the School of Creative and Performing Arts at The University of Auckland.

Originally designed as an abstraction on a single arched fish, the sculpture evolved into four large discs of steel which were aligned in perfect formation. For Richard Shortland Cooper, this works well as a pun on the idea of a school, since fish swimming together in groups are said to be schooling. It was his

hope that the wind might cause the plates to vibrate and flex like a fish moving through water.

Having used the chevron forms and geometric patterns familiar from customary Māori carving to create the design for his dynamic twenty-first century fish, he had the shapes cut out with a laser from plates of corten steel. The finish he interprets as also fulfilling a metaphoric function: "it's also got a rusty-looking finish to it which represents the stage that you are at when you start school – you're rusty and you are there to be polished."

Studying for his Doctorate in Fine Arts while he made this work, Cooper had come to tertiary education as an older student, having worked in security and as a prison officer and logger in the

middle North Island before he began studying at Elam in 1995. A devout Mormon, he is devoted to his family and community. When selected to make the Millennium work for the corner of Wiri Station and Great South Roads, he created Auckland's largest public sculpture with a height of eleven metres. Titled *He Taonga Hiranga Whakanui Whanau* (A Gift to Portray the Importance of Family) 2000, this reinforced cement work features five upright forms based on designs created by students from nearby schools, standing clustered closely together in a group. The surface is textured by hand prints of several generations of his own whanau.

Head of the Art Department at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa's Manukau campus until he was made redundant in May 2006, Cooper retrained as a diabetes self management facilitator. In that capacity, while working for Counties Manukau District Health Board, he had the Millennium sculpture that he had made lit up with blue light to draw attention to the risks associated with diabetes. Contesting the Manurewa seat in the 2011 by-election as the Mana Party candidate, he still finds time to make his sculpture with Whanau Ora appearing in Sculpture on Shore in 2008. He remains committed to art practice as a way of making manifest his understanding of everything visible or invisible that exists across the universe.

Linda Tyler

*Richard Shortland Cooper, Mātauranga 2001, corten steel, 4000mm diameter*