



Bird Lady (2012), Jamie Pickernell

Environmental Sculpture and Meaning-making in the Auckland Botanic Gardens

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Abstract

Environmental sculpture has become an important component of contemporary public landscapes, where art, ecology, and cultural meaning increasingly intersect. However, limited research has examined how visitors construct meaning through environmental sculpture in botanical gardens or how institutional curation shapes those experiences. Using a qualitative phenomenological case study, this research investigates selected environmental sculptures in the Auckland Botanic Gardens, Aotearoa New Zealand, through repeated field observations and reflexive thematic analysis. Guided by phenomenology, with Dewey's Art as Experience and Coomaraswamy's philosophy informing interpretation, the study examines how sculpture, landscape, and visitor experience generate meaning. Three interconnected themes emerged: Indigenous and bicultural storytelling, ecological metaphor and environmental advocacy, and functional and playful participation. The findings demonstrate that meaning develops through embodied movement, sensory engagement, and the reciprocal relationships among sculpture, landscape, and institutional curation rather than through visual representation alone. By showing how curatorial placement and interpretation shape public understanding of cultural and ecological narratives, the study advances a phenomenological framework for interpreting environmental sculpture as a lived, culturally situated, and institutionally mediated landscape experience.

Keywords: environmental sculpture; phenomenology; botanical gardens; embodied experience; institutional curation

Introduction

Environmental sculpture has evolved beyond the conventional understanding of sculpture as an object displayed in galleries or museums. Situated within living landscapes, these works are experienced

through movement, sensory engagement, and changing environmental conditions rather than through visual observation alone (Khatri 2021). As visitors walk, pause, and respond to their surroundings, sculpture becomes an integral part of place, where meaning is continually negotiated

through the reciprocal relationship among artwork, landscape, and lived experience. Environmental sculpture therefore functions as a relational and experiential form of public art rather than as a self-contained aesthetic object.

Botanical gardens provide an especially valuable setting for investigating these relationships because they integrate ecological conservation, environmental education, cultural expression, and public engagement within a shared landscape. The growing incorporation of permanent environmental sculptures further enriches these spaces by extending their visual, cultural, and interpretive dimensions. Encountered through direct, embodied experience, these artworks encourage visitors to engage with biodiversity, cultural identity, and environmental responsibility as they move through living vegetation, waterways, and garden pathways. In doing so, the sculptures invite reflection on the interdependent relationships between humans and the more-than-human world, transforming the garden into a dynamic site of experiential learning and environmental awareness.

The Auckland Botanic Gardens provides a compelling case for examining these relationships. Its permanent sculpture trail reflects the bicultural and multicultural identity of Aotearoa New Zealand through artworks that engage with indigenous knowledge, ecological values, cultural memory, and environmental responsibility. Many of these works draw upon Māori concepts such as *whakapapa* (ancestral lineage), *mana* (having authority or control over the management of natural resources), and *kaitiakitanga* (environmental guardianship), which express the interconnected relationships among people, ancestors, land, and the more-than-human

world (Harmsworth & Awatere 2013; Mead 2003). Beyond their cultural significance, these works are further shaped by the Gardens' curatorial practices. Through the placement of artworks, the design of visitor pathways, and the official sculpture guide, the Gardens function as an active curatorial institution that influences how visitors encounter and interpret environmental sculpture. Interpretation therefore develops through the interaction of embodied experience and institutional mediation rather than from artistic form alone.

Although environmental sculpture has received increasing scholarly attention, previous research has primarily examined artistic practice, materiality, public art, historical development, and visitor responses. Comparatively little attention has been paid to how permanently installed sculptures in botanical gardens generate meaning through embodied encounters with dynamic landscapes or to how institutional curation influences those experiences. Consequently, the relationships among sculpture, landscape, visitor movement, and curatorial interpretation remain insufficiently understood.

To address this gap, this study adopts phenomenology as its primary theoretical framework, viewing meaning as emerging through embodied perception, movement, and sensory engagement with place. Dewey's (1958) *Art as Experience* provides a complementary aesthetic perspective by explaining how connotation develops through the continuous interaction of artwork, environment, and participant. Ananda Coomaraswamy's (1956) *Philosophy of Asian Aesthetics*, as discussed by Munro (1934), is selectively employed to illuminate how abstraction communicates essential ecological and cultural relationships rather than merely reproducing natural forms. Together, these

perspectives are complemented by an examination of institutional framing, enabling the study to explore how curatorial choices and interpretive materials shape public understanding of environmental sculpture.

This qualitative phenomenological case study investigates how selected environmental sculptures within the Auckland Botanic Gardens generate cultural, ecological, and participatory meanings through the convergence of embodied experience, landscape context, and institutional curation. Through repeated field observations, the study advances a phenomenological understanding of environmental sculpture as a lived, culturally situated, and institutionally mediated practice that enriches relationships among art, ecology, and place.

Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations of Environmental Sculpture

Environmental sculpture is understood as a relational form of public art in which meaning emerges through the dynamic interaction of artwork, landscape, and embodied experience. Unlike gallery-based sculpture, it is encountered within living environments shaped by vegetation, light, weather, seasonal change, and human movement. Within botanical gardens, sculpture becomes an integral part of ecological and cultural landscapes, where understanding develops through direct engagement with place rather than solely through visual observation.

This study adopts phenomenology as its primary theoretical framework because it provides the most appropriate lens for understanding environmental sculpture as lived experience. From a phenomenological perspective, perception is embodied, relational, and grounded in direct engagement

with the world (Macann 2005; Merleau-Ponty 1962; Moran 2005). Therefore, movement, sensory awareness, memory, and the reciprocal link between sculpture and its environment all contribute to the emergence of meaning. This perspective aligns with landscape scholarship that understands places as experienced through everyday encounters and bodily engagement rather than passive observation (Ingold, 2002). Phenomenology therefore provides the principal analytical framework for examining how visitors experience environmental sculpture through movement, perception, and embodied engagement with the Auckland Botanic Gardens.

Dewey's (1958) *Art as Experience* complements this framework by explaining how embodied encounters become meaningful aesthetic experiences. While phenomenology focuses on the nature of perception, Dewey emphasizes that aesthetic meaning develops through continuous interaction among the artwork, the environment, and the participant. Within this perspective, environmental sculpture becomes meaningful through walking, pausing, observing, and reflecting, as these embodied practices shape visitors' experiences of place. To enrich selected interpretations, this study also draws on Coomaraswamy's (1934) *Philosophy of Asian Aesthetics* as a complementary cultural lens. According to Munro (1934), Coomaraswamy argued that art reveals the essential principles of nature rather than merely reproducing its outward appearance. This perspective offers insight into sculptures that express ecological and cultural relationships through abstraction, complementing rather than replacing the phenomenological emphasis on lived experience.

The study is grounded in Aotearoa New Zealand and informed by bicultural

perspectives and Māori knowledge. Concepts such as *whakapapa*, *mana*, and *kaitiakitanga* provide important cultural frameworks for understanding the reciprocal relationships among people, land, ancestors, and the more-than-human world (Harmsworth & Awatere, 013; Mead 2003). Within this context, curatorial practices, artwork placement, and the official sculpture guide actively mediate public interpretation. These institutional dimensions are examined alongside visitors' embodied encounters to understand how cultural and ecological meanings are constructed within the Gardens.

The Auckland Botanic Gardens, therefore, function not only as the setting for this research but also as an active curatorial institution that shapes visitors' experiences of environmental sculpture. The integration of artworks within botanical collections, visitor pathways, and interpretive materials influences how ecological, cultural, and artistic narratives are encountered. This framework positions environmental sculpture as a relational, embodied, and place-responsive landscape experience, shaped through the reciprocal relationships among artistic practice, ecological context, institutional interpretation, and lived engagement with place.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological case study to examine how environmental sculpture shapes meaning-making in the Auckland Botanic Gardens, Aotearoa New Zealand. Phenomenology served as the primary methodological framework because the study focused on how visitors experience sculpture through embodied engagement with the landscape rather than through detached visual observation. Environmental sculpture was considered as a relational practice. Artistic,

ecological, and cultural meanings emerged through interactions among artwork, place, and visitors. Dewey (1958) informed the interpretation of aesthetic participation, while selected ideas from Coomaraswamy supported the interpretation of symbolic relationships among abstraction, culture, and nature.

The Auckland Botanic Gardens was selected as an instrumental case study because its permanent sculpture collection is carefully integrated into diverse botanical landscapes and supported by an established curatorial program. The fieldwork was conducted during repeated visits between December 22, 2025 and January 15, 2026. The approximately 2.5-kilometer sculpture trail was walked several times in the morning, afternoon, and late afternoon. These repeated visits enabled observation of how changes in light, weather, and visitor activity influenced encounters with the artworks. A consistent walking route ensured systematic observation under different environmental conditions.

Data were collected through detailed field notes and site photographs, which were used solely for analysis. Observations recorded each sculpture's spatial setting, its relationship with surrounding vegetation, visitor engagement, sensory qualities, and changing environmental conditions. The official sculpture guide was examined as an interpretive document because its curatorial texts and artwork placement shape visitors' understanding of cultural and ecological narratives (Permanent Sculpture Trail, n.d.). It also served as a practical field resource for identifying the sculptures, artists, and their locations along the sculpture trail.

Data were analyzed using Braun & Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis. Repeated reading of field notes, observational records, and interpretive texts generated

descriptive codes, which were refined into three interconnected themes: Indigenous and bicultural storytelling, ecological metaphor and environmental advocacy, and functional and playful participation. Phenomenology guided the interpretation of lived experience, while Dewey's and Coomaraswamy's perspectives enriched the analysis of participatory and symbolic dimensions. The analysis also considered how institutional curation, including sculpture placement and interpretive materials, contributed to visitors' meaning-making.

The researcher's role as a practicing sculptor and researcher supported close observation while requiring continuous reflexive awareness. Credibility was strengthened through repeated observations, systematic documentation, and ongoing comparison between lived experience and curatorial interpretation. Because the study involved observations of publicly accessible artworks without interviews or identifiable personal data, formal ethical approval was not required. Although limited to one botanical garden and one period of observation, the study provides a contextually rich understanding of how environmental sculpture, landscape, and curatorial practice shape public meaning-making.

Results and Analysis

The analysis revealed three interconnected themes that demonstrate how environmental sculpture within the Auckland Botanic Gardens generates meaning through the dynamic relationship among artwork, landscape, visitors, and institutional curation. Guided primarily by a phenomenological theory perspective, the findings show that visitors experience sculpture through movement, sensory engagement, and embodied encounters rather than solely through visual observation. Supporting

Dewey's (1958) concept of Art as Experience further explains how these encounters develop into meaningful aesthetic experiences, while a Selective cultural lens offers complementary perspectives on how cultural, ecological, and participatory meanings are constructed within the living landscape. Coomaraswamy's philosophy and the Gardens' curatorial practices offer complementary perspectives on how cultural, ecological, and participatory meanings are constructed within the living landscape.

Indigenous Form and Bicultural Storytelling

Indigenous form and bicultural storytelling emerged as defining characteristics of the environmental sculptures in the Auckland Botanic Gardens, where artistic form, native ecology, and Māori cultural knowledge became inseparable from visitors' lived experience of place. Although *The Web* (2014) by Fred Graham, *Waka* (2001) by Virginia King, and *Nīkau* (2005) by James Wright differ in material, scale, and artistic language, they share a common concern with expressing relationships among land, vegetation, sky, water, and cultural memory. Rather than functioning as isolated sculptural objects, these works become integral components of the botanical landscape, inviting visitors to encounter Indigenous values through bodily movement, changing perspectives, and direct engagement with their surroundings.

Constructed from stainless steel suspended between timber poles, *The Web* translates the fragile geometry of a spider's web into a monumental yet visually transparent environmental sculpture. During repeated field observations, the work appeared almost immaterial when viewed against the bright sky, while from other positions it merged with the surrounding shrubs and



The Web (2014), Fred Graham

trees, becoming partially concealed within the vegetation. The sculpture therefore resisted a single fixed viewpoint. Instead, its appearance continually shifted according to changing light, weather conditions, and the visitor's movement around the site. Inspired by Don McDonald's poem describing a dew-covered web destroyed through human carelessness, the sculpture symbolically evokes ecological fragility and the interconnectedness of threatened ecosystems. Installed within the Threatened Native Plants Garden, the transparent structure metaphorically links earth, vegetation, and sky, encouraging visitors to recognize conservation not simply as environmental protection but as an ongoing relationship between human responsibility and the living world.

Virginia King's *Waka*, carved from timber and positioned at the entrance to the Threatened Native Plants Garden, functions simultaneously as sculpture, threshold, and cultural marker. Its elongated, canoe-like (boat-like or *waka*) form rises above the pathway through an open lattice structure that allows vegetation, light, and sky to remain visible through the carved openings. During repeated observations, the sculpture appeared to frame rather than interrupt the surrounding landscape, creating a gradual



Waka (2001) Virginia King

transition between the public garden and the protected native planting beyond. The work acknowledges the neighboring tōtara tree, whose presence reinforces Māori understandings of *mana*, *whakapapa*, and *kaitiakitanga*. Rather than illustrating these concepts literally, the sculpture encourages visitors to experience them spatially by walking beneath and through the gateway. The changing patterns of sunlight and shadow projected onto the ground further strengthen its integration with the living landscape, allowing the sculpture to participate in the continual rhythms of the environment.

James Wright's *Nīkau*, installed on the exterior wall of the Huakaiwaka Visitor Center, establishes a distinctive dialogue between sculpture, architecture, and living vegetation. Fabricated from stainless steel and brass, the stylized palm abstracts the rhythm of New Zealand's native palm tree, *nīkau*, rather than reproducing its botanical appearance. During field observations, the sculpture appeared visually connected to the three living *nīkau* palms growing opposite the Visitor Center, creating a subtle relationship between artistic interpretation and natural growth. Continuous streams of water descending from each sculptural form introduced movement, sound, reflection, and changing light into the work, enhancing



Nīkau (2005), James Wright

qualities of transparency, fluidity, and ecological vitality. Mounted above the stone retaining wall rather than rooted in the ground, the sculpture simultaneously echoed and contrasted with the living palms nearby, allowing visitors to compare natural and artistic forms within a single visual field. The flowing water further reinforced themes of renewal, transparency, continuity, and the fragile dependence of plant life upon water and environmental balance.

Viewed comparatively, these three sculptures reveal a shared sculptural language based upon openness, permeability, and environmental integration. Unlike monumental public sculptures that dominate their surroundings, *The Web*, *Waka*, and *Nīkau* deliberately employ transparent structures, pierced surfaces, and open frameworks that permit vegetation, sky, sunlight, and atmospheric change to remain visually present. Stainless steel, carved timber, flowing water, and open structural forms become active participants in the landscape rather than barriers separating sculpture from nature. Their differing locations within the Gardens the Threatened Native Plants Garden, its ceremonial entrance, and the Huakaiwaka Visitor

Center also establish a coherent sequence of encounters through which Indigenous ecological knowledge unfolds progressively as visitors move through the site.

From a phenomenological perspective, the meanings of these works emerge through embodied perception rather than detached observation. Visitors experience *The Web* by looking upward through its delicate structure into the sky, *Waka* by passing beneath its gateway into the native landscape, and *Nīkau* by perceiving the continuous dialogue between sculptural abstraction, flowing water, and living palms. In each case, movement, changing viewpoints, light, sound, and environmental conditions become constitutive elements of aesthetic meaning. This experiential quality closely aligns with Dewey's (1958) concept of Art as Experience, in which artwork, environment, and human participation remain inseparable. Coomaraswamy's philosophy further deepens this interpretation by suggesting that art discloses the essential qualities of nature through symbolic transformation rather than literal imitation. Accordingly, Graham does not reproduce an actual spider's web, King does not simply represent a canoe, and Wright does not duplicate the botanical form of a nīkau palm trunk. Instead, each artist transforms familiar natural forms into symbolic structures that communicate Māori concepts of interconnectedness, guardianship, ancestry, and ecological continuity.

Collectively, these sculptures demonstrate that environmental sculpture within the Auckland Botanic Gardens functions as a relational and bicultural practice through which Indigenous knowledge, environmental stewardship, artistic craftsmanship, and lived experience are continuously negotiated within the open landscape.

Ecological Metaphor and Environmental Advocacy

Ecological metaphor and environmental advocacy emerged as a second major theme within the Auckland Botanic Gardens sculpture collection. Unlike the indigenous sculptures that foreground bicultural identity, *Tuna* (2013) by Bing Dawe, *Topiary* (2007) by Jeff Thomson, and *Butterfly* (2008) by Llew Summers communicate ecological relationships through abstraction, metaphor, and embodied engagement with the landscape. Although they differ in material, scale, and sculptural language, all three works transform familiar natural forms into interpretive experiences that encourage reflection on biodiversity, environmental vulnerability, and the interconnectedness of human and non-human life. Their placement within carefully curated botanical settings allows ecological meaning to unfold gradually through movement, changing viewpoints, and direct encounters with vegetation, weather, and surrounding space.

Bing Dawe's *Tuna*, fabricated from weathered bronze and mounted on a steel base above a spiraling timber pedestal, presents New Zealand's longfin eel through a restrained synthesis of abstraction and ecological narrative. Installed beside wetland vegetation associated with aquatic habitats, the sculpture appears closely integrated with its surroundings rather than imposed upon them. During repeated field observations, its meaning became more apparent as visitors moved around the work. The timber support's rising spiral contrasts with the eel's downward-curving body, creating a visual tension between ascent and descent. This relationship evokes migration, life cycles, and ecological vulnerability. The weathered surfaces also harmonize with timber, grasses, soil, and nearby water-associated



Tuna (2013), Bing Dawe

planting. Rather than representing the eel naturalistically, Dawe distills its movement and fragility into a simplified sculptural form that encourages reflection on threatened freshwater ecosystems and the dependence of native species on healthy habitats.

Jeff Thomson's *Topiary* adopts a different ecological strategy by transforming corrugated iron, a material strongly associated with New Zealand's rural and built environments, into the stylized form of the native fantail, or *pīwakawaka*. Positioned within the *Urban Trees* collection, the sculpture creates an immediate dialogue between industrial material and living vegetation. During repeated observations,



Topiary (2007), Jeff Thomson

its green weathered surface visually echoed surrounding foliage, while the corrugated texture retained clear associations with human construction and rural architecture. The sculpture therefore occupies an intermediate position between culture and nature rather than treating them as opposites. As visitors approach from different directions, the simplified bird form becomes progressively recognizable, while changing light alters the reflective qualities of the layered metal surfaces. Installed among mature trees and within an environment frequented by living birds, *Topiary* encourages comparison between sculptural abstraction and everyday encounters with wildlife, extending ecological awareness

beyond representation toward direct environmental perception.

Llew Summer's *Butterfly*, cast in bronze with a weathered black-green patina, approaches ecological meaning through the expressive potential of the human body. Rather than depicting a butterfly literally, the sculpture translates symbolic qualities associated with the *Butterfly* into an abstracted human figure. Its outstretched arms evoke the expansive movement of wings, while the lifted leg and balanced posture suggest dance, vitality, freedom, and continual transformation.

During repeated field observations, changing sunlight, cloud cover, and shifting viewpoints continually altered the sculpture's relationship with the surrounding landscape. Positioned within an expansive open lawn framed by mature trees and changing skies, the work remains accessible from multiple directions, allowing its silhouette to unfold against the



Butterfly (2008), Llew Summers

living environment. The weathered patina further harmonizes with the surrounding vegetation. Rather than illustrating a butterfly's biological form or life cycle, Summers uses metaphorical abstraction to express renewal, balance, and the interconnectedness of human and non-human life.

Viewed comparatively, the three sculptures demonstrate that ecological advocacy within the Auckland Botanic Gardens depends not only on symbolic content but also on the relationship among material, scale, sculptural form, and landscape context. Tuna derives much of its ecological force from the dialogue between weathered bronze, timber, and wetland planting. Topiary creates a productive tension between corrugated industrial material and living vegetation, showing how ecological identity can emerge through the transformation of cultural materials. Butterfly, by contrast, locates ecological metaphor within the expressive human body, using gesture and open spatial setting to evoke transformation and renewal. Their differing scales reinforce these environmental roles. Tuna encourages close observation beside wetland vegetation, Topiary integrates naturally among mature trees, and Butterfly benefits from an expansive lawn where its dynamic gesture can be experienced against sky and vegetation. Their site-specific placement therefore strengthens rather than merely accompanies their conceptual meaning.

From a phenomenological perspective, the ecological meanings of these works emerge through embodied movement, sensory perception, and direct engagement with place rather than through detached visual observation. Visitors construct meaning as they walk around the sculptures, compare artistic forms with living vegetation and wildlife, and respond to changing light,

weather, and spatial relationships. These lived encounters reflect Dewey's (1958) concept of art as experience, in which aesthetic understanding develops through continuous interaction among the artwork, the participant, and the environment. Coomaraswamy's philosophy further enriches this interpretation by suggesting that artistic abstraction reveals the essential qualities of nature through transformation rather than literal imitation. Tuna distills ecological vulnerability through movement, Topiary transforms industrial material into native wildlife, and Butterfly translates metamorphosis and vitality into human gesture. Collectively, the three sculptures demonstrate that ecological advocacy within the Auckland Botanic Gardens is realized through the reciprocal relationship among sculpture, landscape, and embodied experience. Material craftsmanship, metaphorical imagination, site-responsive curation, and ecological context therefore converge to deepen visitors' understanding of biodiversity, environmental responsibility, and the living world.

Functional and Playful Sculptures: Embodied Interaction and Participatory Experience

The sculptures *Bird Lady* (2012) by Jamie Pickernell, *Egg Chair* (2016) by Samantha Lissette, and *Camp Site* (2007) by Peter Lange collectively demonstrate how environmental sculpture within the Auckland Botanic Gardens extends beyond visual appreciation to become an embodied and participatory experience. Although each work differs in material, scale, artistic language, and spatial character, all three encourage visitors to engage physically with sculpture through sitting, climbing, entering, resting, touching, and imaginative play. Their permanent installation within the Gardens

creates a sequence of interactive destinations where sculpture becomes integrated with everyday movement through the landscape rather than functioning as an autonomous object.

Constructed from weathered steel and timber, *Bird Lady* presents a life-sized hybrid figure that combines human and avian characteristics into a welcoming public presence. The elongated beak, bird-like feet, simplified human body, and timber bench create an approachable composition that appears almost natural within the surrounding lawn. Rather than completing the composition independently, the sculpture intentionally leaves one side of the bench vacant, inviting visitors to sit beside the figure. During repeated field observations, adults, children, and families consistently embraced the sculpture, sat beside it, and photographed themselves together. Consequently, the work functions simultaneously as sculpture, seating, and a social meeting place where aesthetic experience develops through companionship and shared participation.

Egg Chair, cast in bronze, adopts a more abstract sculptural language. Its elongated neck, raised wing-like forms, and simplified bird-inspired composition transform the essential qualities of flight and shelter into a functional chair. Positioned within a shallow egg-shaped enclosure edged by a steel border, the sculpture evokes the symbolic space of a nest rather than depicting a bird literally. Although much of the original wood-chip covering has dissapeard, scattered remnants remain visible whithin the enclosure, indicating its earlier ground treatment. This textured ground contrasts with the surrounding green lawn, visually distinguishing the sculpture's immediate setting. Although its scale appears comparatively modest within the expansive



Egg Chair (2016), Samantha Lissette

open lawn and mature trees, this visual restraint strengthens its relationship with the landscape by allowing the surrounding environment to remain dominant. Adults naturally used the sculpture as a seat and viewpoint. At the same time, children frequently climbed onto it and imagined it as a bird or playful vehicle, demonstrating how meaning emerged through bodily participation rather than observation alone.

Camp Site offers the most immersive spatial experience among the three works. Constructed from brick and ceramic at approximately life size, the sculpture combines a brick boat with an adjacent ceramic tent whose woven surface recalls traditional basketry and local craftsmanship. The interior floor, composed of geometric blue, white, and black ceramic tiles, creates an illusion of spatial depth, enriching movement through the structure. Located beside the lake amid mature trees and



Camp site (2007), Peter Lange

wetland vegetation, the installation establishes a close dialogue between land, water, shelter, and journey. During repeated observations, visitors climbed into the boat, rested on its integrated seating, walked through the tent, and moved back and forth between the two elements. These activities transformed the sculpture into an inhabited environment where recreation, imagination, and social interaction became inseparable from aesthetic experience.

Compared, the three sculptures demonstrate that participation is shaped by the interplay among material qualities, scale, artistic abstraction, and landscape context. *Bird Lady* achieves immediacy through its life-sized presence and human scale; *Egg Chair* encourages intimate and imaginative engagement despite its smaller physical size; while *Camp Site* expands participation through inhabitable architectural forms that accommodate collective use. Their differing scales therefore complement rather than compete with the surrounding landscape, revealing how environmental sculpture can generate diverse forms of embodied experience without dominating its botanical setting.

From a phenomenological perspective, these works acquire meaning through movement, touch, perception, and repeated

encounters rather than through detached visual contemplation. Dewey's (1958) concept of Art as Experience further explains how aesthetic understanding develops through active participation, where sitting, embracing, climbing, resting, and moving become integral to the artwork itself. Coomaraswamy's philosophy offers a complementary interpretation, demonstrating that abstraction reveals the essential qualities of nature through transformation rather than imitation. Birds become chairs, human and avian identities merge into a shared symbolic figure, and vernacular craft traditions are transformed into inhabitable sculptural forms. Collectively, these sculptures show that environmental sculpture within the Auckland Botanic Gardens functions not merely as public art but as a relational medium through which craftsmanship, landscape, imagination, recreation, and ecological awareness are continuously experienced together.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the environmental sculptures of the Auckland Botanic Gardens constitute more than a collection of public artworks. Drawing on a phenomenological case study informed by repeated field observations, it argues that meaning emerges through the dynamic relationships among sculpture, landscape, visitors, and institutional curation rather than from the artworks in isolation. Indigenous storytelling, ecological metaphor, and participatory sculptural practices together reveal how environmental sculpture fosters cultural understanding, deepens ecological awareness, and encourages embodied engagement within a living botanical landscape.

The findings indicate that aesthetic experience develops through movement, sensory perception, and direct encounters

with place. Rather than perceiving sculpture as an autonomous object, visitors construct meaning through their ongoing interactions with changing light, vegetation, weather, and spatial relationships. From this perspective, phenomenology offers a productive framework for understanding environmental sculpture as a lived, embodied, and relational experience. Dewey's concept of Art as Experience (1958) further explains how active participation transforms aesthetic appreciation into meaningful engagement. Similarly, Coomaraswamy's philosophy of art demonstrates that abstraction conveys the essential qualities of nature through symbolic transformation rather than literal representation.

The study also highlights the important role of the Auckland Botanic Gardens as a curatorial institution. The placement of sculptures within botanical collections, together with interpretive materials, actively shapes how visitors encounter indigenous knowledge, ecological narratives, and public participation. Environmental sculpture, therefore, functions not merely as an aesthetic addition to the landscape but as an interpretive medium through which art, ecology, and place become mutually constitutive.

By integrating phenomenology with Dewey's experiential aesthetics and selectively drawing on Coomaraswamy's philosophy, this study offers a coherent interpretive framework for understanding environmental sculpture in botanical gardens. More broadly, it demonstrates that botanical gardens offer distinctive settings where artistic practice, environmental stewardship, and everyday experience converge. Future research could extend this work by examining visitor perspectives through interviews, comparative studies across botanical gardens, or longitudinal investigations of how seasonal

and environmental change continue to shape the experience of environmental sculpture.

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