



## Evocations of distance

*John Edgar's new sculpture embodies cultural journeys back and forth between the old and the new world, and is the latest addition to a distinctive New Zealand garden near London. Elizabeth Rankin reports.*

In 2007 a New Zealand garden was established at The Savill Garden in the royal landscape of Windsor Great Park and it was inspired by the indigenous plants given to Queen Elizabeth II during her state visit to New Zealand in 1986. Open to the public, the 35-acre Savill Garden is one of Britain's greatest ornamental gardens.

Mark Flanagan, Keeper of the Gardens for the Crown Estate and an ardent admirer of New Zealand's unique flora, initiated the landscape competition, which was won by Sam Martin, a Cantabrian with a London practice. While developing the only garden representing another nation within the Crown Estate, Flanagan and Martin realised this was an ideal opportunity to install an artwork that would add another dimension to the uniqueness of the site. Trish Clark was appointed as the project manager, and a small group of benefactors, based in London and Sydney, underwrote the project.

During the reign of another queen a century earlier, a statue of Captain Cook might have honoured the achievements of Empire or, in later times, an image of a

Maori chief might have provided an indigenous emphasis. Either would have suggested New Zealand's unique place in the world, by evoking either distance or difference. But, apart from such subjects seeming patriarchal and outdated, this is not a formal garden with axial avenues, symmetrical beds and clipped topiary that would sustain the monumentality of formal statuary. The paths and planting here have the curving contours favoured in modern gardens, providing echoes of New Zealand landscapes on a modest scale that convey a sense of intimacy.

The challenge was to conceive an artwork that would speak of the country without dominating the informality of the garden. Trish Clark identified John Edgar's *Lie of the Land* – serendipitously created for *headland 2011* on Waiheke Island – as an ideal prototype. She initiated discussions that resulted in an agreement between benefactors, landscape designer and the Crown Estate, and then Edgar was commissioned to remake all but one of the elements for a new *Lie of the Land*, using materials that would withstand the northern hemisphere climate.

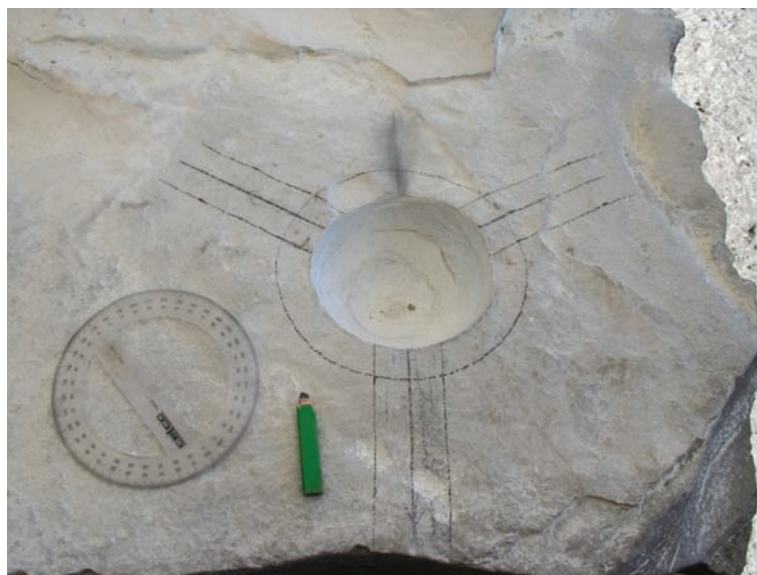
Opposite page: John Edgar's *Lie of the Land*, 2012 (basalt, marble, bronze) in Savill Garden, Windsor Great Park, near London. Photo: Sam Martin

Right (from top): *Lie of the Land*, *Standing Stone*, basalt; *Lie of the Land*, *Compass*, marble. Both works in progress in John Edgar's studio

Installed in July 2012, *Lie of the Land*, with its focus on the land rather than historical or cultural icons, integrates with the natural garden rather than imposing itself. The work has two parts to be discovered by those who explore the site: a standing stone of black basalt from the Lunn Avenue quarry in Auckland is some way along the path from a horizontal counterpart of pale Takaka marble from Nelson that is coupled with a tripod of patinated bronze. The stones may weigh over a ton apiece but they rest directly and unpretentiously on the ground, and the upright basalt is only chest height. The native stones complement the native plants surrounding them, and reinforce the garden's sense of connection for New Zealanders through the natural materials and their links to both North and South Islands. They are metaphoric landmarks which the artist intended to aid New Zealand visitors to 'find their bearings' on the other side of the world. Perhaps they even suggest lodestones that point the way home.

Edgar is an obsessive collector of stones and these fill the grounds of his studio, a converted factory in Glendene, West Auckland. The stone he works with has always been important to him, not merely as a sculptural medium, but for its embedded meanings. To initiate an ambitious project in 2005, Edgar travelled to Scotland, the homeland of his paternal forebears, to search out specimens of the fine granites that have been quarried there for centuries. His finds were then brought to New Zealand to be carved together with local stone in Edgar's distinctive style of inlay that unites elements of different colours and grains to create intriguing composite forms. In this case, the combination of imported and local stones suggests how hardy Scottish stock has formed a significant part of New Zealand's heritage, as it has Edgar's own family.

Old histories of people moving between the two countries were echoed in a literal fashion when the stones were transported from Scotland to Edgar's studio, then travelled back as sculptures which were exhibited at the National Museum of Scotland for the *Homecoming* celebrations in Edinburgh in 2009, before finally coming home to New Zealand again – a rich re-enactment of emigration and return. The sheer logistical challenge of transporting the stones seems a modern metaphor for the hardship of historical journeys and settlement – but it doesn't seem to have daunted Edgar any more than it did those early travellers.



The series' title given to the five sculptures, *Ballast*, further extends the associations, reminding us how stones were used to stabilise empty British sailing ships on their way to New Zealand, returning with a cargo of produce at a time when New Zealand was a bounteous larder for the motherland's ever-increasing population. Most of the ballast was simply off-loaded and abandoned, or used for mundane building purposes. Long lost, it could not be rescued for the repatriation Edgar had first planned, but by reworking Scottish stones here, he suggested the possibility of renewed life and new identity in the colony – again evoking settler stories.

For *Lie of the Land* in The Savill Garden, the stones have also travelled, this time to England: it was critical for the project that they be of New Zealand origin, like the flora of the garden. The sculptures speak directly of the geology of the country, the basalt displaying the dark pitted surface of volcanic stone, its irregular five-sided form shaped by the natural fracturing of the rock, while the more luminous marble element retains the marks of the quarry tools that wrested it from the ground. The natural striations and strata of the marble's upper face suggest a diminutive topography, reminiscent of the layers of a contour map, a microcosm of the lie of the land.



*Landmark*, 2009, basalt, copper, nephrite jade, jasper, 740 x 790 x 400mm.  
Photo: Sean Shadbolt



John Edgar at Savill Garden during the installation of *Lie of the Land*. Photo: Sam Martin

Within this irregular surface there's delight when you discover an exquisitely worked bowl shape with three radiating channels revealing the beauty that lies at the heart of the marble when it's cut and polished with infinite patience. This is not merely a pleasing demonstration of the sculptor's skill and the stone's visual appeal: the form relates to the topographical concepts underpinning the sculpture. It replicates the markings on trig stations designed to support the triple legs of theodolites used by surveyors to appraise and measure terrain, equipment also suggested by the bronze tripod that stands over the marble form. The idea of stable centring is reinforced by a plumb line suspended from the apex of the tripod, ending in a bronze bob with its tip hanging over the midpoint of the concave hemisphere carved in the stone. Its precarious immobility seems to represent a still point in an ever-changing world of global mobility.

The trig marker had already featured in Edgar's *Ballast* series, referring to devices used by explorers to plot their positions on uncharted territory. Edgar has long been working with direction finders, and his *Compass for Aotearoa*, which is now in Te Papa, was made in nephrite jade in 1984. He dates his fascination with compasses from early in his life as part of a family of keen trampers. In his sculptures they take on more universal connotations, such as voyages of discovery that brought travellers to New Zealand's shores. These references are not simply descriptive: for *Ballast* Edgar teasingly titled a work with a three-channelled trig device *Compass*, and another, which has four channels matching the four points of a true compass, is called *Landmark*. Allusions are also found in the way he combines different materials: small elements of jade and jasper from New Zealand are mounted on

*Compass*, 2009, granite, basalt, 910 x 900 x 230mm.  
Photo: Sean Shadbolt



compass roses set into dark, polished grooves in Scottish whinstone for *Landmark*, while pink Peterhead granite in *Compass* rests on an inlay of black New Zealand basalt, shaped like the silhouettes of coastal headlands on seafarers' charts.

There is another playful visual conundrum in the form carved into the upper surface of the standing stone in *Lie of the Land*, which like its marble counterpart, has a concave bowl revealing the unexpected lustre of polished basalt. But it has five channels radiating from the central form. The uneven number echoes the triple channels in the marble but, while those match their metaphoric purpose as a trig marker, the quintuple channels have no clear reference other than to the five sides of the basalt stone. Yet in the context of the work they evoke a direction finder of sorts, perhaps a compass to a more complex universe that involves dimensions of time as well as space.

Redolent of closeness and connectivity for New Zealanders, to other visitors *Lie of the Land* will speak of the remoteness of the country and the challenges of historic voyages to southern oceans. And it will have an intimately tactile appeal for all. The carved motifs are deliberately placed below eye level and within easy reach, inviting inquisitive fingers to enjoy their polished surfaces and relate more closely to the stones. Over time their touch will imprint the stone's surfaces, just as the verdigris patina on the tripod will alter with changes in the atmosphere. The environment will also affect the work in other ways, whether it's the wind swaying the plumb line or rain filling the concave hollows in the stones. Edgar is not perturbed by such possibilities. Prompting imaginative readings of its simple forms, the layered resonances of *Lie of the Land* seem more likely to be deepened than disrupted by the patinations of time.



*Plumb Line*, 2012 (detail), bronze. Photo: John Edgar



*Standing Stone*, 2012 (detail), basalt. Photo: Sam Martin