

# The Depth of Knowledge

## Kazu Nakagawa in Christchurch

GRANT BANBURY

Everything has a depth  
which I can only see  
as soon as I reach and touch it  
it becomes a surface . . .  
a surface has everything  
this is the only place I can work  
Day sixty five  
rain  
I am more closer to the sky today  
Day sixty seven<sup>1</sup>

In 2000, during the crisp winter months of June through August, Japanese-born New Zealand artist Kazu Nakagawa was artist-in-residence in the School of Art and Design at Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology. The above extract, a quote from a diary Nakagawa assiduously kept pinned around the studio wall during the residency, reveals aspects of the artist's philosophy, observations and approach to life and work.

Although full of exquisite line drawings, incomplete sketches or traces for proposed works, the most enigmatic aspect of his diary is the brief text notations, not unrelated to the poignancy of haiku poetry—sparse and minimal. If Nakagawa's writing appears awkward English it remains eerily insightful. Snippets signal ways of seeing or finding meaning in existence. Some passages highlight a surprising openness to the world around him or reflect Nakagawa's quiet nature: an unexplained interior world he experiences; a place where surface, in all its manifestations and possible meanings, has more depth than we dare to imagine.

In terms of language it is important to acknowledge that on arrival in this country in 1986, with his then wife Mika, Nakagawa could not speak English. When asked recently to comment on this disorientating

experience he stated: 'All I could see [hear] was a continuous flow of sounds when I was supposed to hear meaning'.<sup>2</sup> Yet, as his art practice developed and his knowledge of English increased, meaning (in linguistic terms) took on an increasingly important role in titles of his artworks. A series from the mid-90s, for example, includes the reference to self (the artist) with the use of 'I' at the beginning of titles: *And 'I'* (2000) and *'I'/the difference* series from 1996-7. Was this an attempt to seek a more direct connection or conversation between the viewer, the artwork and himself, or to help Nakagawa come to terms with a foreign culture and find a meaningful place/context within it? Ambiguous and questioning, his titles remain integral to his practice, knowingly challenging viewers' perceptions.

This residency allowed Nakagawa to meet Christchurch-based artists Michael Reed and Graham Bennett. Nakagawa's cultural background, shyness and the fact his art was outside mainstream contemporary New Zealand sculptural practice have always set him apart and made him a fascinating choice for a residency in a tertiary institution. Quiet places have always attracted this artist and the relative isolation of Waiheke Island, where Nakagawa has chosen to live and work, was in contrast to a city and the bustling Polytechnic. His expanded horizons and interaction with people are highlighted in his comment, 'from no talk to many talk'. Also, Nakagawa's connection with Polytechnic tutor Michael Reed proved profitable as Reed introduced him to the processes of screen-printing. Significantly, also, Nakagawa's time in the South Island was to prove important from a curatorial perspective.

In 2000, Nakagawa was not widely known outside Auckland, although he had been exhibiting in group shows there since 1987 and had held his first dealer



gallery exhibition at Aberhart North Gallery in 1992.<sup>3</sup> A survey, *Kazu Nakagawa: New Zealand Works*, covering a brief five-year period from 1991 to 1994, was presented at Pakuranga's Fisher Gallery in 1996-7 and toured to the Dowse Art Museum in Lower Hutt.<sup>4</sup> In reviewing the exhibition Justin Paton observed 'Never merely elegant, Nakagawa's furniture creates an unexpected hushed and minimalist stage-set for an audience of one: you'.<sup>5</sup>

In the early '90s, Nakagawa exhibited in two invitational group shows at the CSA Gallery in Christchurch: *The Chair Show* in 1991 and *Tables and Lamps* the following year.<sup>6</sup> Even today the chair remains an exciting prospect for designers and artists worldwide to re-invent anew. *The Chair Show* presented a range of contemporary artists' inspirations alongside classic designs, historical pieces, as well as paintings, photographs and some more offbeat inclusions. Nakagawa's functional entry—a matching pair of stately chairs made from ash—combined precision and elegance, revealing an exceptional craftsmanship learned while studying in Japan.<sup>7</sup> Stretching skyward, these tall high-backed chairs, with interconnected seats, forming a gentle arc, generated an elegant formality, an intimate pairing.

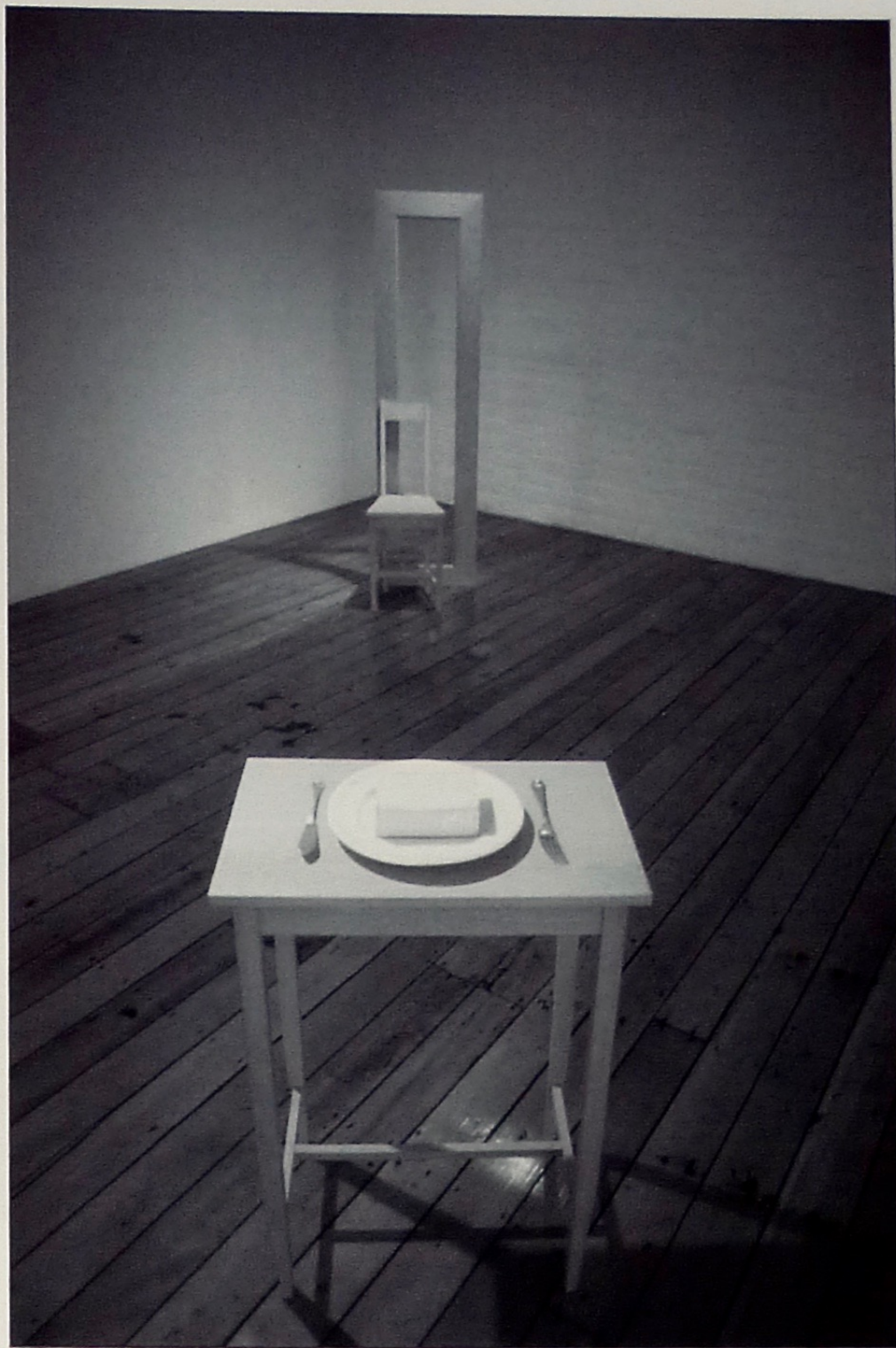
Over time, Nakagawa's practice broadened, embracing conceptual leaps, spirituality and philosophy, and a greater awareness of the gallery as a transformative 'space'. His fascination with chairs, frames, staircases, shrines and ladders—as exemplified in the large three-panelled wall installation with tapering ladder *see no hear no speak no* (2000), produced during the Christchurch residency—transforms them into metaphors for the way we live and they remain consistent themes. Small hand-sized shrines from recycled wood, such as the 1991 *Steps to the Sun* balance exquisitely carved interiors against roughly sawn exteriors; monumentality in miniature.

Nakagawa's first solo presentation in Christchurch, *I'll still have our dream*, opened on 14 April 1998 at Campbell Grant Galleries.<sup>8</sup> Within two years of being introduced to Christchurch audiences, Felicity Milburn, Curator of Contemporary Art at the Robert McDougall Art Gallery and Contemporary Art Annex, invited Nakagawa to take part in two group shows: *Uneasy Spaces* (2000) and *Sculpture in the Gardens: Transition and Change* (2001-2). 'Dreams', *dreams* (2001), Nakagawa's entry for the second show was the artist's first site-specific outdoor installation. Consisting of two matching rectangles (appearing black and white) resting parallel on a raised grass mound encircled by massive pines, it introduced a greater sense of

(opposite) KAZU NAKAGAWA 'a chair/and I' 1997-9  
Oak, canvas, gesso & resin panels 3645 x 905 x 38 mm. installation size variable (Stevenson Collection, Marlborough)  
(Photograph: John McCombe)

(right above) KAZU NAKAGAWA *not for the time* 1994  
Oak & mixed media, installation size variable  
(Collection Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu)

(right below) KAZU NAKAGAWA *until 'I'*—detail 1994-5  
Oak, she-oak and mixed media, installation size variable  
(Collection of The New Dowse)

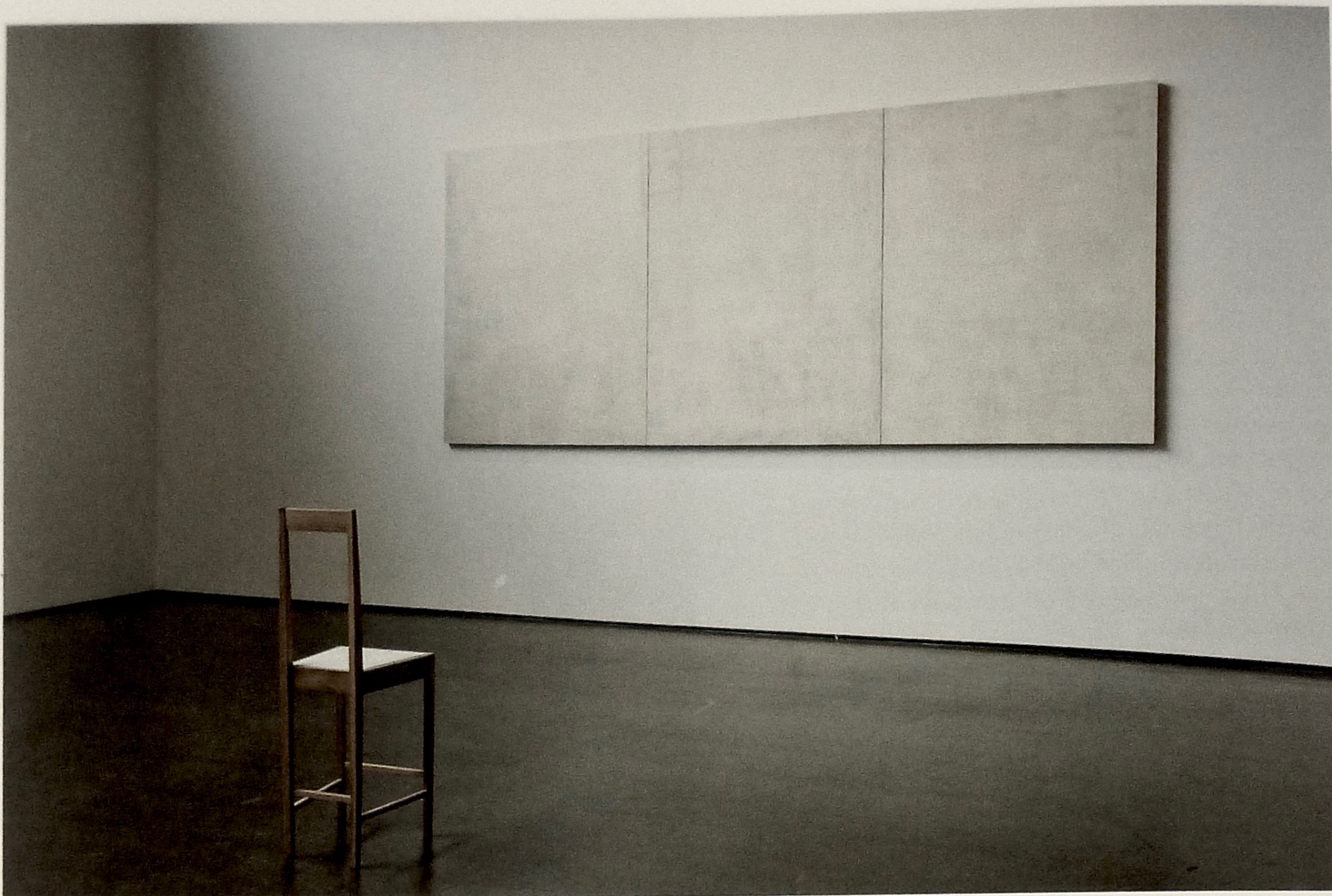


spatial awareness to his oeuvre. The word 'dreams' was embedded in the works but indiscernible. Highly reflective and polished, they appeared as tomb-like sentinels at rest.<sup>9</sup> In 2002, Milburn acquired one of the artist's major installation works, *not for the time* (1994) for the gallery's permanent collection.

*not for the time* comprises a small chair with a solid (oversized?) vertical frame leaning against it, and, strategically positioned some metres away, a small elegantly proportioned table offers a table setting for one—a box on a white china dinner plate with utilitarian knife and fork. The cream-coloured lidded box appears cheese-like. A heightened sense of unease is achieved due to the largeness of the frame overshadowing a miniature chair. This finely tuned oak tableau asks questions about time, place and the human condition. Underscored by a sense of dislodgment and isolation one wonders what is being addressed in this lone setting where human presence (absence) abounds? *not for the time* generates







a palpable energy field. Referring to this work as 'elegant and thought-provoking', Milburn also spoke of Nakagawa as 'an artist of the highest calibre'.<sup>10</sup>

The unsettling nature of many of Nakagawa's installations ideally suited the curatorial premise of *Uneasy Spaces*, focusing as it did on 'the fragmented and often uncomfortable relationships that exist between artwork, the viewer and the mental and physical spaces between'.<sup>11</sup> Other artists involved, Chiara Corbelleto, Sean Kerr, Fiona Gunn and the emerging Brendon Wilkinson, presented a diverse range of sculptural practice. In the same year an article outlining Nakagawa's background and offering insights into his motivations and aesthetics was published in an international sculpture periodical.<sup>12</sup> By this stage Nakagawa moved freely between wall-based work and installation, using his preferred materials of wood, canvas, gesso, cement (*Fuisse* 1992) and resin, creating objects dealing with materiality and the complexities of 'presence and absence'.<sup>13</sup>

In 2001, Nakagawa worked with long-time friend, the composer Helen Bowater and sound engineer David Bowater to create *Sea of Serendipity*.<sup>14</sup> Helen created a haunting soundscape from two recorded segments (7 minutes 35 sec and 5 minutes 4 sec) of Nakagawa working in his studio; both segments were looped and played together. One of Nakagawa's classic chairs and polished, minimal wall-panels were presented with the sound tape, generating a dialogue across disciplines, with the process of creating the visual components being interwoven through sound into the finished product. Nakagawa embraced this opportunity for two languages to work together and create something new—a haunting evocation.

The intense patience and meditative processes of Nakagawa's practice are nowhere more fully realised

than in *Knowing* (1995-6), a fragile, circular, fortress-like structure hinting at ritualistic powers.<sup>15</sup> The large circle, created from a sequence of tied sticks cradling wooden balls, remains open—an entry or exit point. Each ball, a staggering 108 in total, was created by pushing a square block of wood into a moving bandsaw over 4000 times and suggests 'wholeness', as if a unique world in itself. Buddhists commonly believe human beings have 108 earthly desires. Nearly a decade later, in 2004, Nakagawa again employed the same number system in a series of polished, repeated grainy plywood panels. This time, the ball had transformed into 108 ethereal, black moon-like spheres inscribed and painted with subtle minute tonal variations of black (each a perfect illustration for a haiku poem).

Waiheke Island's *Sculpture on the Gulf*, a noteworthy outdoor biennial event presents opportunities for many New Zealand sculptors to position their achievements, not only in relation to each other but also against a stunning sea-engulfed backdrop. Nakagawa's 2009 entry, 'showcase' (2008/9), is perhaps his most ambitiously complex work to date, and most beautifully realized in terms of content, material and site, with the serene volcanic island Rangitoto (Maori for 'Blood Sky') visible behind, across the shimmering water. The word *Rangitoto* is visible on both sides of a rectangular glass box, perched on wooden legs, a perfect museum specimen case. The frosted appearance of the etched glass is broken, as each letter remains transparent. Nakagawa

(above) KAZU NAKAGAWA *And 'I'—Sea of Serendipity* 2001  
Oak, canvas, plaster & mixed media, installation size 2000 x 3600 x 4200 mm.

(opposite) KAZU NAKAGAWA *showcase* 2008-9  
Oak, glass & mixed media, 1300 x 2000 x 500 mm.



has never visited Rangitoto Island, stating: 'I haven't been on it but I look at it a lot from the ferry. I have no interest to land at all, but I like to watch'.<sup>16</sup> And that is his point; Nakagawa's interests are in perceptions, or rather the ability of art to alter, clarify or engage the viewer in relationship to the experience of seeing. The three books inside the cabinet are made from solid layers of plywood enshrined in cream-coloured canvas covers, enriched with plaster and resin. Exquisitely carved into each is the word *Rangitoto*—the 'R' beginning on the spine with each letter spaced slightly apart as if to breathe. Repeated, the word echoes as you absorb the sound of the place name.

Undoubtedly at times Nakagawa's immaculate polished monochromatic surfaces, use of repetition and symmetry, resemble a minimalist viewpoint, exquisitely packaged and touchable—yet one may also perceive an embodiment of an ordered Japanese aesthetic. Ultimately is this helpful in understanding his unique vision? One could assume Nakagawa is conversant with theories associated with art and especially the American minimalist movement of the 1960s, or perhaps it is easier for us to position his work as a given within its context. But, remarkably, Nakagawa is not trained in art, art history or art theory.

Here is a true artist who invites us to explore a place within ourselves, beneath the surface where we can begin to acknowledge his subtleties, strengths and depths. Nakagawa's contribution to sculptural practice in this country over the last 25 years is indeed exceptional.

1. Quotes from unpublished diary, *Kazu Nakagawa: Artist in Residency, 2000*, Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology, Christchurch 2000, unpaginated.
2. Unless otherwise stated all quotes are from email communication with the author, 30 June 2010.
3. Works by Nakagawa were included in *Winstone Craft Biennale* (1989) and *Artiture* (1990) exhibitions, both held at Auckland War Memorial Museum.
4. Tim Renner, Director of the Fisher Gallery, curated Nakagawa's survey exhibition.
5. Justin Paton, 'Chairished works', *NZ Herald*, 6 December 1996, p. B5.
6. *The Chair Show* was curated by Grant Banbury. See Pat Unger, 'Christchurch', *Art New Zealand* 60, Spring 1991, pp. 51-52.
7. Although Nakagawa studied furniture making in Japan he cites his study of navigation, engineering and language as crucial to his art practice.
8. See Adrienne Rewi, 'Enigmas, intangibles' *Sunday Star-Times*, 19 April 1998, p. F9.
9. *Sculpture in the Garden*, presented in the Botanical Gardens, was a series of site-specific temporary installations by invited sculptors. *Transition and Change*, 8 December 2001-7 April 2002, included works by Bing Dawe and Enid Eiriksson. 'Dream', *dreams* was represented in *Sculpture on the Gulf* in 2003 and won an award for the best sited work, positioned in a remote beach alcove in Matiatia Bay.
10. See letter from Felicity Milburn to Grant Banbury, dated 16 July 2002, Campbell Grant Galleries archives.
11. 'Uneasy Spaces', *The Press*, 3 May 2000, p. 38.
12. See Cassandra Fusco, 'Embracing Simplicity', *World Sculpture News*, Vol 7, No. 3, Summer 2001, pp. 48-51.
13. *Fuisse* (1992) was gifted to the Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu by the artist and Campbell Grant Galleries in 2008.
14. *Sea of Serendipity* was first presented at The Suter Gallery, Nelson, 16 March-8 April 2001.
15. *Knowing 1995-6* is illustrated in Warwick Brown, *Another 100 New Zealand Artists*, Godwit Publishing, Auckland 1996, unpaginated.
16. Artist quoted in Minka Firth, 'Return to Rangitoto', *Gulf News*, 31 December 2008, p. 36.

