



Finding beauty

Artist and sculptor Jane Downes sees beauty where others see rubbish. From the house that possums once inhabited through to rusted old saws, she transforms the unlovable into the loved.

Words Shelley Robinson

The bush had moved in and so had the possums at a Little River house. Sculptor and former interior designer Jane Downes surveyed the derelict Montgomery Road property in front of her, which her soon-to-be-husband Mario had brought her to. There had been two attempts to roof it, but neither had seen through the job and there were natural water features as a result. The 1970s wall oven, still with the plastic on it, was rusted. The cabinetry was there but hadn't been installed. It was almost as though the people had lost interest partway through the project and wandered off, leaving the possums to wander in.

Most people would quickly fold themselves back into their car and tear off, wheels squealing, down the road back to safety, admonishing whoever had brought them to such a place. But not Jane.

She loves the unlovable, transforming things that others deem to be ugly into their full beauty: a fairy godmother, if you will. From bug and insect sculptures to, yes, even houses filled with possums.

It was 2005 when they viewed the property, and in 2011 they bought it.

"We only paid land value. The structure of the house was over-engineered for its time, with concrete foundations and reinforcing. It was definitely worth the effort," says Jane, then pauses.

"Though I don't think I'd want to do it again," she adds, with that quiet chuckle she has. It took them two and a half years to restore the property with local builder Callum Schenkel.

With gorgeous high ceilings, exposed beams and bubble windows, Jane and engineer Mario slowly coaxed the house out of hiding, leaving behind its wild past and creating an artist's hideaway nestled in a Little River valley.

It is one of those places you could visit several times, yet each time discover something you hadn't seen before. It is a veritable museum for those who love form, colour and structure due to the many wall hangings, lamps and colourful furniture. With a whole wall of lamps, it is clear lighting is Jane's passion.

"I've collected lamps from my travels, and friends of ours wired up this house for us. I think they counted up that I had 50 pendants, so it was quite a job – a whole wall display of table lamps," she says.

The house has clung to its 1970s vibe, with bright fluoro-colours on chairs, the half-circle leather couch, and a playful seat seemingly made of giant-sized pieces of Pebbles candy.

For Jane, however, there are three special places within this space she and Mario have created.

Her office in the original laundry, a huge room full of light where she designs her sculptures on her computer; the carport studio for the "dirty stuff", like packaging up sculptures for delivery; and the workshop just down the hill a bit from the house for the "really dirty stuff", like cutting with the CNC plasma torch and hand-moulding sculptures. And she and Mario need that space because her whimsical yet captivating sculptures of 3D dandelions, bees, honeycomb, bugs and silhouettes are hugely popular.

"It's got quite successful. I never imagined you could make a living as an artist, but the way we do it, you can," she says.

That way is through repetition. Due to technology, Jane can design a sculpture on the computer and pop it on a USB stick for Mario. He heads to the workshop to plug in the CNC plasma cutter and lays down a sheet of steel, sourced as



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seconds from steel manufacturers, and the sculptures start emerging.

"I'm lucky working in 3D, whereas a painter can't [do repetition], unless they go to printmaking. I can spend a day or two on the computer making an artwork, get my prototype. Once I've got it, I'll spend a couple of weeks getting the design right. Then I can keep producing them and that makes it more affordable for people, which is what I have aimed for. It is really nice to see people with their first artwork, to be able to do that," she says.

Jane exhibits in many places, like the Little River Gallery, and she sells online through her Ironweed Products brand. She thought she had exhausted her potential customer base, but the March Covid-19 lockdown and aftermath proved

her very wrong. After a post on the Facebook group Chooice, where people can showcase their products, she received three years' worth of orders in two days.

"It went crazy and I was so surprised; there must have been a whole lot of people I hadn't reached. My new normal is a lot higher, getting 10 times as many orders as I would normally get for this time of year," she says.

"The Little River post office isn't going to be closing anytime soon; we kept that pretty busy. One day, the postie couldn't fit it all in his van," she laughs.

Jane has exhibited at events such as Sculpture on the Peninsula and Sculpture on the Gulf, with pieces including a six-metre tall dandelion sculpture. This year, Jane won the

ABOVE: A huge honeycomb sculpture was a crowd-pleaser and award-winner for Jane.

2020 Friends People's Choice Award at the Auckland Botanic Gardens Biennial Sculpture in the Gardens for BeeHaven, a giant honeycomb.

You can almost hear her mind ticking over as she talks about the honeycomb. Right now, she is trying to work out how to turn it into a lit sculpture. Her mind and hands, she admits, never stop creating.

"Even when I'm watching TV, I'm knitting something. I'm quite introverted and I get the energy from making things rather than people," she says.

She scours second-hand shops and markets to source things that other people find unlovable in order to create more.

RIGHT: Jane is working out how to turn her honeycomb into a lit sculpture.



"My husband calls me a magpie; I just collect sparkly things. Even my friends know to keep things aside. I'm always roiling up shops for treasure that I can use."

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"I remember I was at a market and came back with a big grin on my face with an armload of old saws, and my husband said, 'What are you doing with all those? They're no good.' I said, 'I'm going to make them into artworks.' I cut them into ferns and feathers and sold hundreds of them. So, when he looks at me now, I say, 'Just remember! I don't like throwing anything out. I have stuff in stock for when I think now is the time to make that into something.'"

She quite likes that she is making weeds and bugs out of scrap and that people find them beautiful.

"I like the challenge of making something beautiful that is not considered beautiful."

And so, in her and Mario's little hideaway in the valley, within the unwanted house that they turned beautiful once more, you will find them making the unloved into the memorable once again.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: It took two and a half years for Jane and Mario to rebuild their home, and it is filled with wonderful quirky details; Jane at work with her plasma cutter; Jane still hand moulds her sculptures, including bending the legs on her bees.