

DEPARTURE

4-20 Aug 2021

Tony Nicholls

The Man and His Shed

The man and his shed is that hallowed space, that sacred ground. The place where machines of all kinds can be found.

Where the man is staunch, strong, and proud. And his jaw is set, with his furrowed brow.

His work is brutal, cold as steel, there is no hint of a feminine feel.

Well kind of... Tony Nicholls was closer to a kid in a lolly shop when I found him out in his shed, with a grin as wide as the Cheshire cat. No male bravado or posturing, but a willingness to talk about his work and the tools he uses to accomplish it.

Tony has a large shed, ten meters by ten, that is full to bursting with all manner of things.

There are the assorted tools one would expect to find in a shed, along with stacks of raw materials awaiting use, and offcuts to be reused and recycled. Dotted among this assortment was a large tub of liquorice allsorts and empty cans of coke, not quite the bottles of beer and empty pie wrappers expected of a shed dweller, but appropriate for the man with his own version of a lolly shop.

There is a lathe for machining metal, a big old beast that looks as though it has done many hours of service. So when one of the gears failed, it may have made sense to retire her, but instead Tony machined a new gear to replace the old. That seems like some sort of trickery to me, to be able to machine on the lathe, a gear that is required for the operation of the lathe.

Tony Nicholls at work
2021
Photograph by
Geoff Ridder

But that is typical of men and their sheds, there is always a certain magic and mystic that happens within.

Another beast of a machine is an English Wheel, a tool that enables compound curves to be formed in sheet metal. This was acquired so Tony could make car body parts. Car body parts? Oh yes, maybe I should mention there are four Bambinas tucked away in the back of the shed. Four Bambinas!

A fairly new acquisition, is a laser cutter. This piece of modern machinery has enabled Tony to design and create the sculptures in this exhibition. Many small intricate parts are perfectly cut on the laser and then slotted and glued together to form complex moving machines. I was greeted by the venting system for the laser cutter when I arrived, various pipes cobbled together snaking out the door. It may not be entirely acceptable to OSH but it does the job.

And sheds are of course, full of projects—past, present and yet to be. Understandably, dominating the space, were the works for the exhibition. They were spread around the work surfaces, balanced on top of previous projects that have been temporarily abandoned. This new work has consumed hours of Tony's time and attention, requiring copious amounts of coke and tubs of sweet treats. The artist is at work.



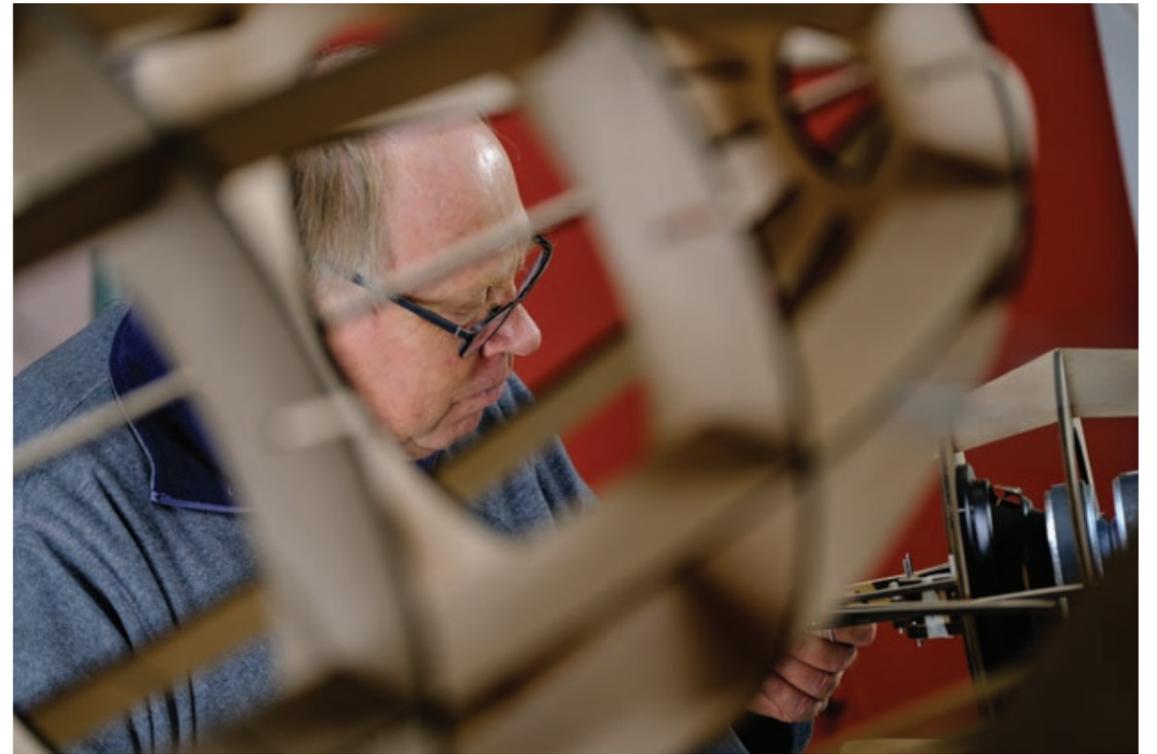


Untitled
Tony Nicholls
2021
Mixed media
Photograph by
Tony Nicholls



Untitled
Tony Nicholls
2021
Mixed media
Photograph by
Geoff Ridder

Tony Nicholls at work
2021
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The Man and His Art

It is difficult to find words to write about Tony's art making. How many ways can I describe his attention to detail, his skill at crafting, his ability to fashion delicate, intricate, highly precise components that come together to form complex kinetic artworks? I fear I'm going to sound repetitive and not convey just how competent this artist is.

Maybe I can compare him to the Disney cartoon character Ludwig Von Drake—that genius inventor that was constantly creating new machines to solve unusual problems, and could expound his knowledge on almost every subject you could think of. This, for me, is in essence, Tony Nicholls, the artist.

As a technician for the School of Media Arts, Tony has been and still is, the ultimate problem solver for student's weird, wacky, and half-baked ideas. When I first met Tony back as a student at Wintec in the early 2000's, I learnt early on that to sweeten a request, a bag of liquorice allsorts was a cunning idea.

Back then, he was creating intricate hand-built guitars; fashioning delicate inlay work for the rosette around the sound hole; carefully selecting timbers for their sound qualities and experimenting with the form of the guitar body to control the movement of sound.

In 2004, Tony began to explore kinetic sculpture. He used sound vibrations that are both audible and inaudible to the human ear and made them visible by channelling soundtracks through speakers into various materials that would then in turn move. One of the simplest iterations were polystyrene cubes bouncing on a surface that speakers vibrated. But true to his nature these sculptures became more complex with time spent in the studio testing, refining, and testing some more. These works were architectural in appearance reminiscent of transmission towers, satellite stations, and whipping power lines.

A few years ago, Tony became interested in photography, especially extreme close-ups. He would delight in showing me the intense details on the feelers of a domestic moth or the otherworldly perspective obtained from a close-up

view of lichen, the reflection in a tiny bead of water, the eight alarming eyes of a spider. It seems that nature is as invested in the detail as Tony Nicholls.

Tony knows his materials and understands that they have a profound impact on his art practice. He embodies the new materialist idea that things have agency along with humans. He is the master craftsman, that is coaxing and encouraging the materials to have influence on the space they inhabit.

Therefore, it doesn't seem surprising that Tony's latest body of work reflects what he has been paying attention to. The exhibition *Departure* gives a sense of entering an alien world where part creature, part machine inhabits the gallery space. Creatures that are whirring and whipping and beating, vibrating an air of danger. I'm thankful they are tethered securely, so my experience remains surreal and awe-struck rather than finding myself at the center of an old-fashioned sci-fi movie.

Untitled (detail)
Tony Nicholls
2021
Mixed media
Photograph by
Geoff Ridder

Cover image:
Untitled (detail)
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R Block, Collingwood St
Hamilton 3204
New Zealand

rampgallery.co.nz
+64 7 834 8800 ext3228
info@rampgallery.co.nz

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