

Fossicker finds fresh fields



● Charlotte Fisher with one of her sculptures now on show at the Fisher Gallery in Pakuranga.

PICTURE: YANSE MARTIN

A TEMPORARY shift to Wellington has forced sculptor Charlotte Fisher to abandon her "wharf rat" habits.

In Auckland she was an inveterate fossicker for the sea-bleached timbers and marine artefacts that end up in her work.

But since taking up in January the Rita Angus residency which gives her a Thorndon house for nine months and an \$18,000 living grant from the Arts Council, Fisher notes that in the capital useful timber is snapped up and recycled for furniture rather than art.

The house comes complete with a 4m high geodesic dome in the backyard — courtesy of publisher Alister Taylor, a former resident. Access is from underneath, like climbing into a spaceship.

Although Fisher has used it for work, the difficulty of access is one good reason why

GILBERT WONG looks at the work of Charlotte Fisher, who has moved from the City of Sails to a city of words.

domes never took off despite the staunchest alternative philosophical arguments.

Odder still, Parliament is five minutes away. Plucked from the haphazard charm of Grey Lynn, Fisher has become acutely aware of power dressing. "We definitely live in the 'suited' end of town."

Without the found objects that she has prized and given new meaning to in the past, her style will undoubtedly change.

"Plaster blocks and words," says Fisher, describing what she has been experimenting with. The blocks are part necessity, considering the difficulty in obtaining her usual materials.

But influence comes as well from Brancusi, in particular a piece called the *Endless Column*. As for the words, Fisher could not help but notice that Wellington is as much a city of words as Auckland is a city of sails.

"There are two major newspapers. We get four papers delivered to our postbox free each week. It's a wordy place partly because of the bureaucrats and politicians."

She has dived into the word culture herself. "The residency has meant that I can focus on philosophy and take time to think and do more reading."

Subject matter has included ancient goddess imagery and archaeology. "That's something I have not done in the past because I wanted to keep what I was doing separate. I wanted to avoid the clichés that can come with those topics."

None of what she has read is likely to dissuade her from what lies at the heart of her sculpture. "I do want to express the strength of womanhood and female symbols in a monumental way."

Monumental means size and bulk. Many of her pieces stand up to 2m or more high. They tend to exact admiration for the sheer physical grunt required to fashion discarded beams of jarrah and deadweights of stone.

She professes to a fondness for acquiring skills that women do not traditionally possess. "When I went to school the girls did sewing and cooking, the boys had metalwork and woodwork." While she felt skilful in sewing and using cloth she saw little reason and a lot of challenge in acquiring skills to "manipulate male materials."

And even if the materials are "male," sometimes she will use traditional female techniques to form them. For example, she pins copper foil sheathing with pins the way people do with cloth.

ALTHOUGH she did do some welding at Elam, Fisher is keen to learn more and have access to equipment. Power tools and the space to wield them brings a financial burden which artists working in other media do not face.

They can work in a room in their house; Fisher often needs to be able to use a block and tackle. Friends, including partner Erwin Van Asbeck, a boatbuilder and film rigger, have passed on skills and equipment.

Power tools do ensure that sometimes work is literally a grind and hard labour. "It's healthy, great for the upper body, but not so good for the lower back."

"Part of what keeps her going is the belief that many of us are alienated from our work. We lack the direct experience of making or doing and the satisfaction that comes from that."

The Rita Angus residency has given Fisher a welcome financial and mental break. But it seems certain that when she returns from the city of words at the end of the year, it will be time for more hard labour.