

IRONY – Jeff Thomson

By Gregory O'Brien for *New Zealand School Journal*

My mother grew up on a farm but has lived most of her life in Auckland City. For her birthday one year, my brother and I wanted to give her something special so we bought her a life-sized chicken, made out of corrugated iron by the artist Jeff Thomson. The chicken looks like a cross between a rusty old tin shed and a bird. It reminded my mother not only of the chicken coops of her Taranaki childhood but also of the red barns and iron roofs she knew well. And it made her laugh.

Since then, the chicken has been stationed on the stairs at home. Its beak is sharp and it often snags the trousers or stockings of visitors going up the stairs. But my mother likes the chicken so much she refuses to move it.

For the past 30 years, Jeff Thomson has been making all sorts of animals, birds and insects from corrugated iron. If you counted the number of life-sized cows he has made, they would now add up to quite a herd. There are also countless sheep, penguins, ostriches, dogs and butterflies. An elephant he made for Auckland Zoo has towered over one of the entrances for nearly 20 years.

Jeff's sculptures can be found all over New Zealand. If you're driving through the town of Taihape, in the middle of the North Island, you'll see a gigantic iron gumboot he made in 2000. Taihape is a town famous for its gumboot throwing competition, but you'd need a forklift or a crane to get Jeff's gumboot off the ground – it's over three and a half metres tall.

Once someone backed a truck into the giant gumboot and Jeff had to make emergency repairs to it. Most of the time, however, he likes what happens to his sculptures out in the open air. They look great when lichen and moss start growing on them. He likes rust, and bird droppings can sometimes make a work look even better. He is particularly happy when birds make their nests in his sculptures. This happens!

Jeff's sculptures make you think about the world in new and surprising ways. Often he starts with small things – butterflies, boots and leaves – and makes them huge. He constructed a five metre tall saxophone which is now sited on the Gold Coast in Australia. He has made three metre long stick insects, and leaves the size of doors.

When Jeff was a boy he loved making things from paper and cardboard – and he did a lot of drawing. At school, he always had trouble reading, no matter how hard he tried. Eventually he found out he had dyslexia – a condition which meant reading and writing would always be difficult. This made art even more important for him.

Jeff was inspired by his father who was a sea captain. While away at sea, his father would make lots of watercolour paintings and Jeff remembers that once, when his dad had accidentally left his paints at home, he made pictures using different kinds of boot polish he had borrowed from other members of the crew. Maybe that is where Jeff got the idea that art could be made from unlikely or strange materials. Instead of a paintbrush or pencil, these days he uses tin-snips, a rivet gun and a pair of pliers.

Between 1977 and 1981, he studied painting and printmaking at Auckland University. He reckons the work he is doing now is very connected with the skills and ideas he picked up there. In the middle of his university studies, he took a year off and spent most of that time walking around the South Island. He started making letterboxes and objects for people he met along the way – and that was when he discovered corrugated iron. And he has never stopped using corrugated iron since.

Jeff likes old, beaten up and weathered sheets of iron – it contains history. It has been places and has stories to tell. Yet it's not the easiest of materials to work with. Jeff says a day in his studio, in Helensville, just north of Auckland, is always very noisy and exhausting. The machinery is loud and he has to wear a face-mask because of all the poisonous fumes. It takes a lot of patience and the work is very physical. There are plenty of sharp edges so he has to be careful.

One of his most famous constructions is a corrugated iron Holden station wagon. Jeff replaced all the shining flat panels with iron, then spent three years driving up and down the country in it. Eventually the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa bought the station wagon. These days it is one of the most popular exhibits in the whole museum.

Sometimes Jeff stencils or paints images on to the corrugated iron. He has made some very wild bouquets of flowers. He has also printed images onto sheets of steel which have been put on the roofs of houses. One house in Wanganui has hundreds of New Zealand sea shells printed on its roof. Not far north of there, Jeff covered the roof of a cow shed in objects cast in lead: hammers, screws and

ornaments. I imagine that birds flying over must wonder what exactly is happening on these rooftops.

Jeff works in a huge, cluttered warehouse. He thinks of it as a 'living museum', although it is more like a panelbeaters' workshop than a gallery. With his wife Shona, he lives in a house in the middle of the studio. When he goes out his front door every morning, it is as if he is entering a world in which everything is made of corrugated iron. He likes this thought.

He employs a full-time assistant and always has lots of projects on the go. As well as making works for exhibitions in galleries he also takes orders for all sorts of sculptures. A while back he made a Rolls Royce out of yellow corrugated iron for a collector in Sydney. He made a five metre tall human head which is permanently on a roadside in the Christchurch suburb of Beckenham. He has also made cabbages, a little bigger than life-size, from iron.

There is a lot of machinery in the working space. When he needs a forklift to move his larger sculptures, he can borrow one from the timber company down the road. As well as working inside his huge studio, he also works on rooftops, farms, out in the sun, wind and rain and he has even made an iron sculpture in the snow.

Corrugated iron is Jeff Thomson's life; he can make it dance and sing and tell us things. His sculptures say a lot about New Zealand and the world beyond. It's a funny, interesting place and you can do anything if you put your mind – and your imagination – to it.