

# Carterton's Rising Star

Carterton is shaking off its small-town, rural image and becoming a bona fide hub of sculptors, textile artists and painters.

A fabulous tree house is cradled in branches overlooking the Tararua Ranges. Strangely beautiful sculptures made out of steel and wrought iron line the driveway. And wood is stacked in neat little piles on the front verandah of the blue wooden house, signalling winter's impending arrival in the Wairarapa.

This is the entrance to the home of Niko Thomsen, who represents one of Carterton's 'hard 3D edge' sculptors. Niko has developed an enviable reputation of forging wood, steel, concrete and wrought iron together to create objects of beauty and longevity. Whether they are garden gates, whimsically-shaped chairs, bridges or sculptural flowers, the artist describes his style as practical yet decorative; robust yet delicate.

"I've tried my hand at many styles over the years before the commercial success of the flowers," says Niko, who is originally from Lubeck in Germany. "I think they're so popular because flowers are always attractive. I recently transformed an old Morris Minor into a piece with flowers that looked like it had been

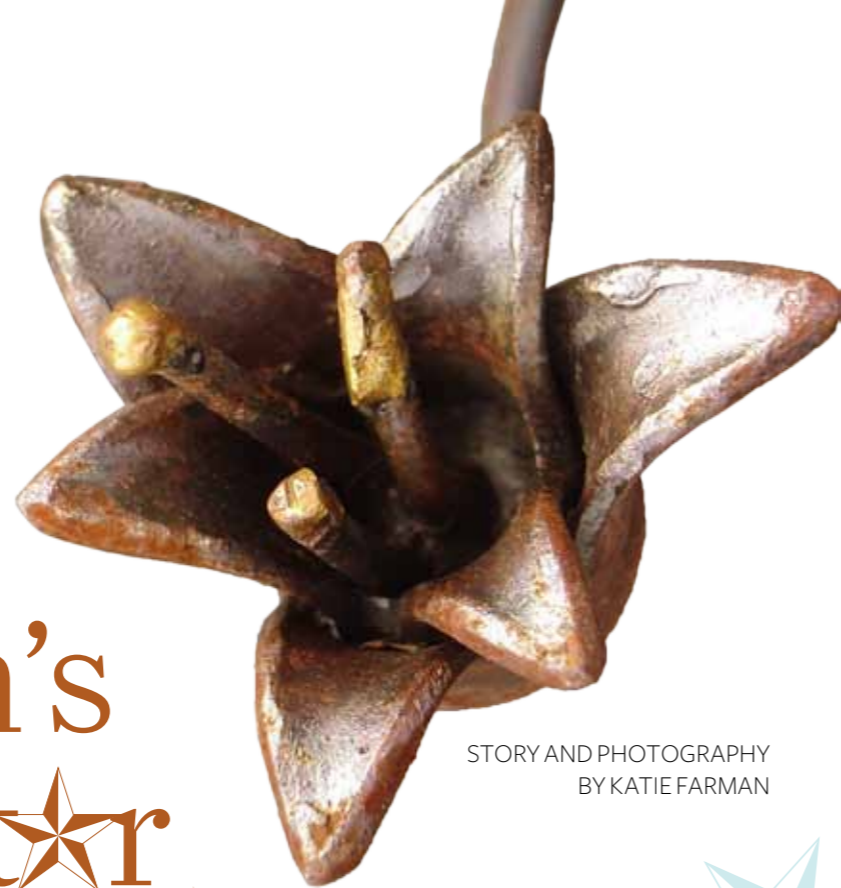


left somewhere and vines had grown over it. It's now on display at the Sculpture Park in Hamilton."

After initially studying painting at Ottersberg Art School near Bremen, Niko's foray into sculpture came about quite randomly after discovering the welder. This would refocus his artistic bent forever. He found that fusing different bits of metal together, and creating something 'real', was more satisfying than expressing himself through canvas; a largely two-dimensional medium.

"Driven by the excitement of the physical engagement with a new material, the smell of oil and setting the old rubbish tin on fire, I started to create things with a real difference. They were heavy, sharp, dangerous, big and they were made from steel," says Niko.

Niko spent seven years developing his welding and design skills under the tutelage of Joerg Rennert before deciding to move to New Zealand - a decision he made rather spontaneously after seeing a sign in a shop window advertising airfares Down Under. After initially living and working in Wellington,



STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY  
BY KATIE FARMAN

below: Carterton sculptor  
Niko Thomsen loves  
working with different  
materials in his workshop.



Niko found a permanent reason to stay in New Zealand after being introduced to his Kiwi partner Vicki Pollock, a massage therapist.

He spent time making highly-detailed furniture and props for The Lord of the Rings, stylish garden sheds and garages, as well as one-off pieces for clients.

Then, inspired by the Wairarapa's diverse landscape featuring the Tararua to the west, dramatic coastlines to the east, and pastoral plains, grapevines and olive groves in between, the couple bought their rural property just south of Carterton.

"I've always been inspired by rural landscapes and, even though I love cities - especially when I was younger, of course - I've always needed to keep some distance from them," says Niko.

The couple has since created a lovely home in which to raise their two children, Leopold (7) and Lucas (4), as well as built a charming studio for Vicki and a workshop for Niko. The latter is made from recycled materials

and features sturdy wooden benches laden with old nails, steel, grunty-looking hammers and clamps. Noise is abundant, especially when he physically bends, hammers and forges together his popular flowers, which are "very slow to grow" (individual flowers can take more than three hours to create). The workshop also features on Main ARtery, the Wairarapa Art Trail where visitors can meet practising artists working in their own creative environment.

"There're a lot of mass-produced things around from the likes of China, making it difficult to compete financially. But I like to think people appreciate handmade New Zealand products that create, rather than import, cultural heritage," he says.

Niko is one of more than 20 artisans - including the traditional and contemporary furniture maker Jeremy Bicknell, painter Jan Eagle and master wood-turner Terry Schischka - who call Carterton home. Attracted by affordable house prices, the landscape and an inclusive community spirit, they are collectively helping the town gain national recognition amongst art's cognoscenti.

Carterton was established in 1857 and is today known as the Daffodil Capital of New Zealand. It also gave the world its first transsexual mayor and MP in Georgina Beyer, and its current mayor, Gary McPhee, rides a Harley Davidson. It boasts Paua World and Parkvale Mushrooms, is a base for hot-air ballooning and is an access point for several vineyards and Stonehenge Aotearoa (on the AA's 101 Must Do List for Kiwis).

But one thing Carterton isn't, however, is Greytown - a popular destination for Wellingtonians attracted by its characterful main street of colonial buildings, boutique shops and eateries. And that's something that sits comfortably with art enthusiast Andrea Johnston, who this autumn will open Red Moa Gallery on Carterton's High Street.

Nestled between café Bambinos (which hosts a craft group run by local artist Victoria Te Tau every Tuesday morning) and second-hand store Watsons, Red Moa Gallery will feature art, sculpture, jewellery, ceramics, glass and bags from local artists as well as those outside the region. Standing atop the gallery will be a huge red moa, designed and created by Andrea's brother and local sculptor Sean Crawford, who employs distinctive materials such as galvanised or stainless steel,

native timbers and copper.

“We don’t want to replicate the success that is Greytown. Instead, we want to give people more of a reason to come to Carterton,” says Andrea. “Masterton, Martinborough and Greytown all have their own unique flavours, and we need ours.”

Andrea, a former shoe designer, is well known locally for organising Sculpture in the Country and the Italian Day at Richmond Gardens. She believes Red Moa Gallery will add to Carterton’s reputation as an art hub and won’t compete with the already established studios or galleries like Wai Art – a non-profit incorporated trust that promotes and showcases Wairarapa artists. Instead, she wants to complement and expand on what’s already available in Carterton.

“More people are getting together now and moving in the right direction... creating something special here and making it a prosperous place,” she says. “I’m not saying art is the only thing we want to hang our hat on, but we do want to create interest for more people to become curious enough to visit here.”

## COLLECTIVE SOUL MADE IN CARTERTON

Four Carterton artisans have created a new collective, designed to showcase the town’s artistic soul.

Lisa Harman thinks of herself as an



ambassador for Carterton. The gallery and workshop she owns with her husband, Brett, are nestled amongst the couple’s established gardens and lie next to their distinctive round yellow house made out of an old cyclone barn, with straw bale ends. Located on the main highway, it’s one of the first buildings you encounter when entering Carterton from the south.

“Visitors often call on our gallery first, due to its location and the uniqueness of our house. So I feel it’s our responsibility to welcome people to Carterton, show them our inspiring space and help them discover what other

**above:** Brightly coloured treasures await visitors to the Harman & Harman studio in Carterton

**below:** Brett and Lisa Harman like to transform recycled materials into new and original pieces of art

**opposite top:** Alison Norris-Baber loves working from her delightful Carterton studio



equally-creative talents are here,” says Lisa.

The Harmans, along with friends and fellow Carterton artisans Alison Norris-Baber of the textile label Agnes Coy and Leanne Taylor of Ramari Textiles, have recently formed a collective called Made in Carterton – an informal group who refer each other’s work.

“We’re three like-minded teams, each making very different art but all to a very high standard and which complement each other,” says Alison. “We’re all living our dream here and recognise that Carterton has a real artistic soul, and we want to share that with others.”

## HARMAN AND HARMAN

Brett and Lisa Harman like to transform recycled materials into new and original pieces of art. Lisa creates colourful and feminine pieces, including tin butterfly brooches, pretty standing frocks, delicate handmade jewellery and popular coloured letters that adorn the walls.

Brett, who has an extensive background in the film industry and worked for Weta Workshop during the making of Lord of the Rings, has a genius for transforming seemingly austere materials – scrap metal, steel, corrugated iron and glass insulators

from power poles – into something surprisingly new and wondrous. His imposing dragon gate made out of old spades, garden forks and chains is the type of work that grows more remarkable each time you look at it, while his 1920s-inspired pedal cars have attracted international attention – actress Cate Blanchett is said to have two.

The couple’s stories of raiding second-hand shops or the local dump for neglected pieces of machinery or old furniture are legendary, so much so that they now receive calls from Wairarapa locals wanting to flog off their old wares. Things like the huge

old petrol tank found on a dairy farm “up the road”, which Brett has converted into an uber cool shower to feature in their new private accommodation studio for two.

“We’re both very tactile and just love tinkering with our hands and creating,” says Lisa. “We’re each inspired by different things, I guess. But when I’m fiddling, I get inspired. And I always have a notepad beside my bed. I also love word play.”

The Harmans moved from Hawke’s Bay to Carterton 11 years ago. After having renovated one house in art deco style, they were ready to create a unique country home for their three children out of an old cyclone barn. “It wasn’t about being a hippy that lives here with a beard,” admits Brett. “It was more about creating from a design angle, and living to our philosophy of being sustainable.”

The house attracted immediate attention from curious locals and featured on TVNZ’s My House My Castle and the Living Channel’s Extreme Houses of the World. Now the Round





*left:* Leanne Taylor is among a wave of craftspeople passionate about producing New Zealand made products.

House, as it's affectionately known, provides the couple with a stimulating environment to create their art and provides visitors with an equally enriching experience.

### AGNES COY

Since opening her studio one year ago, Alison Norris-Baber has never been happier.

The Carterton-based textile artist, whose label Agnes Coy has developed a loyal following, says selling directly to her customers is a joy. "I love that visitors can see where I work and see how I get inspired," she says.

Alison's Clifton Avenue studio, which sits behind her and her husband's delightful 1910 cottage, was converted from an old garage and now includes a large workroom and display

area. Her treasures, many of which have been reworked from vintage fabrics and textiles, are beautifully displayed. Works include lavender pillows and hearts featuring lace and hand-printed fabrics, 100% linen tunics, pin tuck handbags and layered puff broaches.

Originally from England, Alison and her kiwi husband came to the Wairarapa over two years ago with the dream of creating

a more simple life than the one they were leading abroad. Choosing Carterton as their future home seemed fitting because it was a "town with huge potential" and a hotbed for creativity, boasting like-minded writers, sculptors, artists and musicians. Her desire to establish Agnes Coy came from her love of creating something new from something old.

"I really am living my dream here," says

Alison, who used to juggle work as an actress with writing experimental theatre and running a vintage clothing website in Brighton.

Earlier this year, Alison held workshops teaching participants how to print photographic images onto fabric. They've proved so successful she has a waiting list of 70 people wanting to complete the next series.

### RAMARI TEXTILES

Leanne Taylor's works are inspired by Kiwiana and crafts of days gone by. As a young child growing up in Taranaki, Leanne recalls always having a creative outlet to get her hands going. "I learned to knit and crochet from both sides of my family... making things is just what we did," she says matter of factly.

Leanne is amongst a wave of craftspeople passionate about producing New Zealand-made products. Her Ramari Textiles label features nostalgic cushions recycled from wool blankets, playful bunny rabbits, crocheted tea cosies, and embroidered and felted broaches. She has also created cushions and T-shirts featuring a screen-printed 'Carterton' design. Not surprisingly, they've been popular in the small Wairarapa town.

Leanne moved to Carterton in 2000 with her partner Todd Compton, after spending the best part of a decade travelling the country in their house bus. After stints in Gisborne, Taranaki, Geraldine, Clandeboye (near Temuka) and Nelson, the couple returned to the Wairarapa for lifestyle reasons.

Now they own a ½-acre section on Park Road that boasts fruit trees, large vegetable gardens, relocated huts from the Featherston Army Camp - one of which is currently being transformed into a gallery - and three main dwellings: the house bus, a studio and a separate kitchen. Together, they form a U-shape around a courtyard featuring elder trees and soon-to-be-planted grapevines. Leanne, a self-confessed collector of anything vintage, says she is hoping to create a new version of kiwi classics.

"I don't want to follow any trends. I just enjoy making things. A customer recently described my works as timeless, which is a huge compliment."

This Wairarapa town is exploding with creative craftsmen and women doing incredible things. The Carterton crafts scene is one worth investigating for yourself.