

## *Kevin Perkins. Written in Wood.*

**Launch Speech by Richard Flanagan  
Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, 5 December 2024**

Kevin Perkins can be a very funny man. Many years ago I foolishly agreed to launch an exhibition which, on seeing the artists works, I was horrified to discover was awful. As I often do, I rang Kev for advice.

‘Just don’t mention aesthetics,’ Kev advised, ‘ and you’ll be fine’.

And so I duly launched the grotesquerie, talking about many things but never the work. The artist was delighted, the speech was judged a great success and the exhibition sold out.

Kev said he wasn’t surprised.

But tonight I will be talking about aesthetics and a great Tasmanian artist, my dear friend, Kevin Perkins. For there can be no greater honour for any artist than to have their work inspire the work of another artist. When the artist inspired is one you admire deeply, the honour is that much the greater. Kevin’s ex-students often refer to him as ‘the master’—the traditional designation of the great artist—but like me, they know and love him as Kev—a true mate in hard times, a helper, a giver. And so tonight I am here to help launch *Written In Wood*, an exhibition of five new major furniture sculptures, inspired by my novels, made by Kev.

I have not enough minutes to do him sufficient honour. But let me tell you first a little about the man, the descendant of a convict carpenter-joiner, who left school at 14 to follow his brother, also here tonight, to be apprenticed as a joiner, who rose to become Australia’s most celebrated furniture maker-designer, the man chosen above all others by the architect of the new parliament house, Aldo Giurgolo, for the honour of designing and making the furniture for the prime minister’s office. On the day the new parliament house was opened, Aldo Guirgolo—memorably and accurately—described Kevin Perkins as an artist who could make wood sing.

I first met Kev when in 1992 when he, I and the celebrated architect Robert Morris-Nunn came together to make the Strahan Visitor Centre, an interpretation centre celebrating 40,000 years of human history in south west Tasmania. I had never before met a man who more put me in mind of a wedge tailed eagle.

I was struck by his piercing, darting gaze that seemed to see everything, his extraordinary combination of ease and restless surging energy, circling and circling before swooping down to erupt from the earth with another cabinet, table, chair, or sculpture held aloft. Kev was elemental and unique.

Robert and Kev already had reputations. I, on the other hand, had only a failing EH Holden, three small children, rising debts and a half-written first novel. We rafted the Franklin River together. I was struck by Kev’s unerring eye for beauty. Where each night we others would find only ugly wet sticks for our fire, he would find the most exquisite drift wood to burn, each an unexpected sculptural delight, one a sinuous Brancusi-like figure, another polished by the river’s force into Henry Moore-esque

forms. None of us could bear to burn things so beautiful but Kev would cheerily throw them on the flames, because, he said, there was plenty more where that came from.

And with his raptor-like gaze there was indeed wonder everywhere. In the manner of all great artists he is attentive to the details of reality, too easily overlooked. He would find perfectly shaped or coloured river cobbles where I could see none, or hearing a bird cry, look up, his eyes wandering, and then point to a clump of riverine tea tree in which the bird was nesting and bobbing chicks heads would suddenly come into focus.

In the bookcases Kev made for my home he inscribed these lines of William Blake's: "To see a World in a Grain of Sand And a Heaven in a Wild Flower Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand And Eternity in an hour."

All of which sounds suspiciously like a wedgy's world view.

His work over the decades fused the sophistication of a modernist ethic with a uniquely Tasmanian vernacular. His was a poetry of timber, that saw Tasmania's globally unique trees not as a source of profit, the destruction of which enriched only a handful while sickening our society, dividing our people, and corrupting our very democracy in order to turn ancient forests into toilet paper, but rather as our birthright, the creation of which he was part and without which he was less, a world that he would honour using carefully extracted and salvaged timber as a jeweller might use diamonds, sparingly, respectfully, precious stones to be used to speak of wonder, a palette of grain and tone and form to paint a different, better vision of Tasmania with Huon and sassafras, myrtle and black wood, horizontal and fiddle back eucalypt.

He long advocated for the extractive and selective use of our precious timbers rather than the wholesale and wanton destruction of our globally unique natural world. If his work exemplifies the very best of our sacred, beautiful island, if his far sighted vision in the 1990s to recreate the forest industry on a Scandinavian model, wherein native forests were preserved and money invested in top-end design and high quality furniture factories in the regions to create quality jobs and wealth for all, an extractive, respectful industry, if this vision was far sighted and exemplary, equally the way in which it was sidelined and he with it—his expertise and vision dismissed and he sent into an internal exile by the cruel and entirely destructive politics of our successive governments— was a tragedy for all Tasmanians.

I hope the arts minister who is unable to be here today understands that the time for the dismissal of the visionaries and the gifted in our society must end. I hope that she might forcefully advocate to her colleagues for the great Tasmanian voices, such as Kevin Perkins, to be finally heard, to no longer be silenced and sidelined, for art and artists to be seen as central to what Tasmania might yet be, rather than dismissed and too often destroyed.

At the time I met Kev in the early 1900s there was a ferment, an excitement in Hobart particularly, a new confidence that a fusion of politics and art and a new found identification with the uniqueness of our island might produce world class artistic work if we just opened ourselves up to the strangeness and glory of our own world. Artists and art seemed to be everywhere.

It felt a renaissance, a Tasmanian renaissance, expressing itself in art, design, furniture writing and architecture, and its history deserves celebration and its achievements exhibition. I wanted to write out of this ferment but I knew no writers and there were no models for me. Strange as it sounds it was Kev, a furniture maker designer, who taught me so much about writing— how to be a writer; how to fuse your love and passion seamlessly with your work; the necessity of never being content with something that was imperfect, the need for resolution of small details as well as large, and other lessons as well—how you might live well on little if you valued friendship over fashion, the way in which all art is finally craft, the need to get the clauses of my sentences just so as Kev got his joints and finishes just so, the need for structure, as necessary in a good cabinet as a good novel. And so on.

And in this, I am but one of many. There are so many other artists, furniture makers and craftsmen who Kev has inspired, helped and for whom he always been there in a hard time, extending those magical hands in friendship and support.

*Written in Wood* is the culmination of a year's work by Kev, five extraordinary sculptural bench seats, each inspired by one of my Tasmania-centred novels. The timber—monumental pieces of Huon pine and blackwood—were all salvaged, the Huon pine half a century ago from hydro floodings, the blackwood from Kevin's own home—each piece awaiting a project that Kev felt befitted their particular beauty.

And so he has reimagined *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, as an embrace of Huon pine forms, as was the novel's tale of an estranged daughter and father finding each other when she falls pregnant, a story of hope, exemplified in a gorgeous pair of hand-carved pink robins in homage to the pair which appeared outside his workshop while he was carving the seat. There is the marvel of *Goulds Book of Fish* in which Kev has magically, marvellously carved each of the novel's 12 fish characters, and the soaring beauty of the carved black swan soaring over the *Wanting* bench seat. That book was dedicated to Kev, and the character of the carter who finds Mathinna in the final chapter of the book, in the infinite gentleness of his hands as he lifts Mathinna's body from the puddle in which she has drowned, was modelled on him. In the marvellously sinuous elegance of blackwood twin benches that is *Death of the River Guide*, the dark wood echoing the dark, tannin stained waters of that tale, we find the very Franklin itself carved into one of the two benches.

And then there is *Question 7*, a love seat over which hovers a carved serpentine form—what in art is known as the line of beauty—below which is inscribed the first letters of the names of my mother, father, wife and three daughters, echoing that book's great abiding question: *Who loves longer?* These last details caught me unaware, and in first seeing them I had to turn away so that Kev—an admirably Tasmanian man of his generation as am I—would not see me tear up.

There is so much more I wished to say about Kev tonight—how he was the first Tasmanian artist I met who somehow fused life, material, form, experience, and art into a seamless whole. His fearlessness, his unshakeable belief that we too were capable of the best, his endless kindness and generosity, his constant stream of ever surprising wondrous works—all these were to me so admirable.

Extraordinary pieces like his thylacine chest of drawers and Cape Barren goose cabinet are at once elegies and expressions of delight, examples of craft and design that somehow transcend their form and ambition to become something far greater.

Kev likes to say some people have a head and some have hands—meaning some can design and some can make—but that he was lucky enough to be gifted with both abilities. But, as always, he undersells himself and his achievement. If he is head and hands, he is also heart, the biggest heart, and the fusion of head and hands with that heart is what makes those cabinets some of the greatest and, I suspect, enduring works of art our island has yet produced.

All this is in way of simply saying thank you, Kev, thank you not just for these beautiful, profoundly moving works on exhibition here which honour my writings far more than they deserve, but thank you too for a lifetime of great works and for your remarkable friendship, helping me, helping so many others, inspiring us all, showing us the way forward with your extraordinary works, making our island anew.

The Wood-singer.

The Master.

Big Kev.

The Wedge circling over us all, seeing deep into our island and our very own hearts and singing it into hope and beauty as chairs, tables, benches and sculptures shaped out of our forests, deepening our stories and with them, us.

I congratulate TMAG for honouring this great Tasmanian artist by mounting this exhibition, I thank the sponsors, Julianne and Andrew from the Mountaineer Foundation, for so generously making it possible, and I thank you all for coming here tonight.

*Thank you.*