

joining THE DOTS

— From professional tennis player to mosaic artist – John Botica talks about his passion for pebbles

Q. Do you do more public or private realm work? Who have you worked with in the past?

A. I started by doing mostly public work, completing seven public projects for different councils in Auckland. As people got to know my work, I'm increasingly involved in private projects. I've been very fortunate to have worked with some great New Zealand landscape designers like Mark Read of Natural Habitats, Catherine Hamilton of Soul Environments, Renee Davies, Jill Rice and Suzanne Turley, just to name a few.

Q. Tell us about your history – have you worked with mosaics for long, and what attracted you to this form of design?

A. This is a wonderful story. I played tennis all my life and I was on the pro tour. We came to New Zealand 12 years ago and my wife started doing ceramic mosaics. I got fascinated by it, dreaming of becoming the next Friedensreich Hundertwasser. Five years ago I was approached by Natural Habitats to do a couple of pebble mosaics for their private clients. I owe special thanks to Mark Read for he has unleashed the greatest passion of my life within me by engaging me in those projects. I cannot believe that I'm doing something that the ancient Greeks did around 300 BC. I can not depict enough the love and passion I cherish towards this art. And then I got a great boost when my Tree of Life mosaic was voted in 2008 among the top 100 mosaic works in the world.

Q. Do you have an unlimited range of pebbles to work with?

A. I'm very lucky to have a friend in Vaughan Bosson from Stone and Water World. I get all my pebbles through him and we source interesting pebbles from all over the world. Lately in all my projects I've been working with New Zealand pebbles – New Zealand has got the best stones and pebbles in the world. I'm fascinated with this country, by its beauty, by its people and by its natural resources. For example there is a pebble from Rakino Island that I used in a recent project. The stone is so black, something like this does not exist anywhere else in the world. It's so hard to find a black pebble. There is a Chinese black pebble but it is polished and does not have nearly the beauty of New Zealand stone.

Q. Do you also draw the designs?

A. Yes, I do all my designs and I find this part of the process very challenging since one has to take into account that the mosaic has to be subdivided and this becomes very tricky since you do not want the design to suffer by introducing many pieces that fit like a jig-saw puzzle. The reason for division is because of the substantial weight of the individual slabs. I had some segments in my projects that weighed 70kg. Can you imagine installing these pieces?

Q. Is it necessary for pebbles to have the same dimensions?

A. Pebble mosaics are labour of love. One has to sort the stones before

a project. I work explicitly with skimmers – long flat pebbles that are placed on their edge. Using fat stones robs a pebble mosaic of its dynamics and wonderful flow that skimmers create. No, you do not want to have pebbles all of the same size since by creating a mosaic the pebbles are offset like bricks, for example, which gives the whole creation an additional strength. So you really want to have pebbles of as many different sizes as possible and many different widths as well to fill in the spaces accordingly.

Q. Tell us about the process. How do you begin and are the pieces completed in situ? You also mentioned a reverse pre-cast technique, how does that work?

A. The greatest thing about pre-cast technique is that segments are created in the workshop. The strength of slabs created using non-shrink grout and well-mixed concrete is enormous. One can work with very small pebbles which is impossible with dry-mix technique in situ. And the most advantageous aspect is that since the sections are created upside down they will have an absolutely flat surface.

With pre-cast technique the pattern is placed on a base board and the mould is assembled around the pattern, usually 75mm high. Each pebble is placed with its eventual top surface upside down into sand. Working upside down is rather like working "blind" since placing pebbles is an act of faith based on experience.

When all pebbles are placed in sand a special non shrink cementitious grout (in liquid form) is poured over the mosaic. When the grout stiffens to the consistency of putty the mould is filled with well mixed concrete with aggregate. The concrete will "go off" and will attain a state of reasonable hardness by the following day. The grout and concrete are still "green" by the next day and now comes the exciting moment! The mould is dismantled, the whole slab turned over and the sand brushed off. For the first time one sees the actual mosaic!

Q. What are the greatest challenge when building a mosaic?

A. The greatest challenge by far for me personally is the installation process. The computer creates 5mm joints between individual slabs and all of these slabs have to be placed exactly and fit like a jig-saw puzzle. What makes it even more challenging is that slabs have to be placed on exact spot taking into consideration their remarkable weight. Slabs are laid on a continuous bed of pliable mortar (around 25mm thick). As slabs are laid all of them are being levelled and the whole mosaic should have a slight fall – a good average to aim for is 1:50. The next day the joints are filled with the same non-shrink grout. Now we have a pebble mosaic of enormous strength – it's virtually indestructible. Pebble mosaics are designed for foot traffic and I've done a couple of mosaic for vehicular traffic as well. Another great aspect of pebble mosaics is that they require very little maintenance if any at all.



ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM: "Tane Mahuta with kereru", a mosaic with a 3m diameter installed at the Wilson School in Takapuna, Auckland; this mosaic at Western Park in Ponsoby, Auckland features a central piece of brass which is placed over a sump to facilitate drainage; The "Tree of Life" mosaic is 4.2m in diameter and consists of 27 segments. It is installed at a children's playground in Wainoni Park, Greenhithe on Auckland's North Shore.