

Balancing Act

by Tricia Glensor

For the past four years, Stavros Kyriakides has created sculptures along Wellington's wild and windy south coast. His artworks are distinctive. They use only natural materials – and there's no glue, nails, wire, or concrete holding them together. Instead, Stavros relies on the laws of physics.

Off the Cuff

When he was a boy, Stavros loved to watch circus acts on TV. He was especially fascinated by the high-wire performers. "Their skills were amazing to me," he remembers.

For a long time – many decades – Stavros was content to enjoy other people's creativity. Then one day, he noticed some driftwood that had washed up on the beach after a storm. Off the cuff, he chose a few interesting pieces and began to experiment. Carefully, he placed them on top of each other. They moved in the wind, but that was OK. The main thing was they didn't fall over. These pieces of wood became Stavros's first sculpture.





Feel the Force

A lot of artists work with found objects. Stavros is unique because he chooses his material with a special question in mind: Will it balance? That's because everything Stavros makes relies on gravity to keep it stable. Without it, his sculptures wouldn't exist.

To balance an object, Stavros must first find its centre of gravity. This is the point around which the weight of an object is evenly spread. "For something to balance," Stavros says, "its centre of gravity needs to be directly in line with the area supporting it."

Finding this centre is easy when the object has a regular shape, like a plank. Its weight is evenly distributed. But Stavros works with driftwood and rocks that come in all shapes and sizes. This makes their centre of gravity trickier to find. Luckily Stavros knows just what to do.

centre of gravity

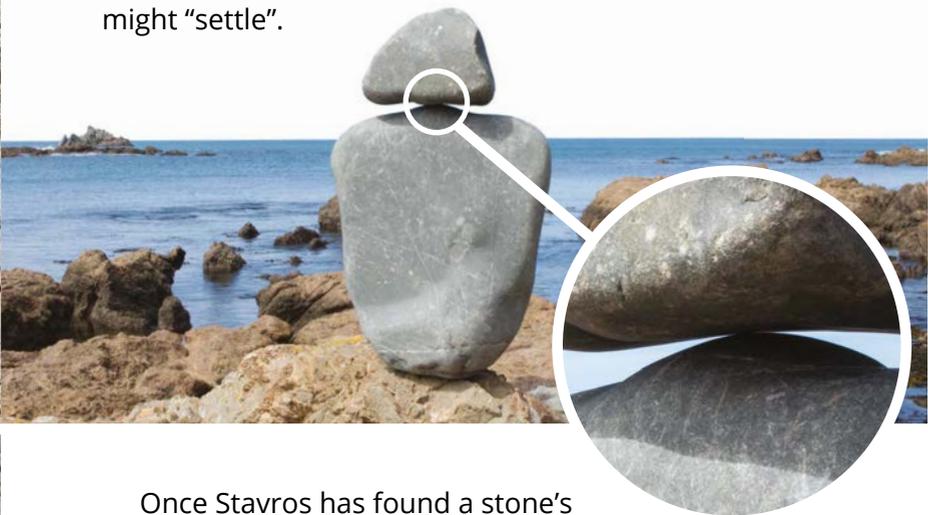
Finding the Centre of Gravity

1. This piece of driftwood has a regular shape, and its weight is evenly distributed. The centre of gravity is in the middle.
2. This piece of driftwood has an irregular shape. One end is heavier than the other. This means the centre of gravity is closer to the heavier end.
3. Now that the supporting base has been moved so that it's under the centre of gravity, the driftwood is balanced.



Standing Upright

Mathematicians use calculus to figure out a tricky object's centre of gravity. Stavros prefers another method: time and patience. This approach works no matter what material he's using, although smaller stones are usually easiest. That's because Stavros can hold each one in the palm of his hand, turning it gently to assess the stone's weight and where it might "settle".



Once Stavros has found a stone's initial resting point and it's standing upright, he'll crouch down low. He likes to examine what he calls the "kiss point" - the place where the two surfaces touch. He's looking for bumps or cracks ... anything that will help to make the stone more stable.

Balancing a single stone takes time. Making an entire tower is harder still because of the constant danger of toppling. About this, Stavros has some familiar advice: "Make sure each stone's centre of gravity is in a direct line with the base. If the tower gets out of kilter, it's guaranteed to fall over."



Stavros the Artist

Stavros rarely names his sculptures, but he doesn't mind when others do. Some people think the craggy rocks look like faces gazing out to sea or like the figures once found on the prows of sailing ships. Stavros is always pleased when people see things in his work, although he doesn't think of himself as an artist. "I'm just messing around on the beach, having fun," he says.

But many people *do* think of Stavros as an artist. In 2016, he received an award from Wellington's then mayor, Celia Wade-Brown. The award recognised the way his sculptures "draw attention to the local materials and view beyond". South coast locals commenting on social media agreed. "I love seeing the changing art along the beaches," one person said. Another liked the fact the sculptures just pop up. "For ages, we never saw who constructed them. It was a great mystery. We found new surprises every day."



Something from Nothing

Stavros's work is made to survive Wellington's energetic weather. In strong winds, some of the sculptures move slightly – the longer pieces of driftwood look as if they're dancing. So it's not the weather that destroys the artwork – it's people. Surprisingly, Stavros does have critics. "One person said that what I do is like graffiti," he says. "It's not 'natural'."

Occasionally Stavros finds that his sculptures have been kicked over. Once, someone chopped a piece up with an axe. "I think they wanted to smash something so they could feel powerful," he says. "Maybe they were bullied once, and this was their way of making up for it."

How does it feel when people destroy his work? Does Stavros ever get angry?

"Yes, I do," he says. "It shows no respect. Sometimes, when I find a piece half-destroyed, I feel so frustrated I want to throw it all back into the ocean. But I see it as a challenge too. If someone messes with a sculpture, I'll put it back together." Stavros has done this with one piece countless times (see above).

Why does he keep at it?

"My work gives me a lot of satisfaction. There's a real feeling of accomplishment when I finish a sculpture. I've created something out of nothing."



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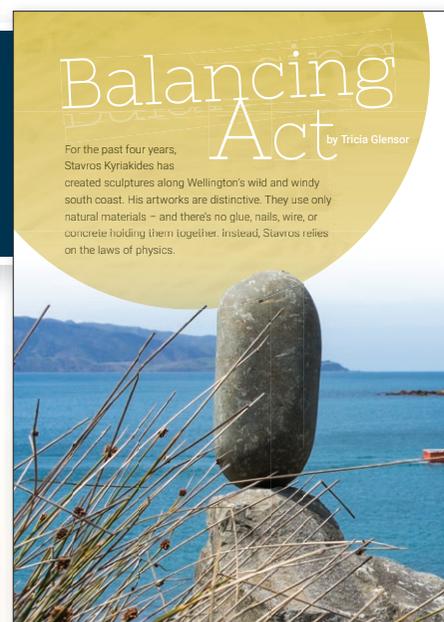
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