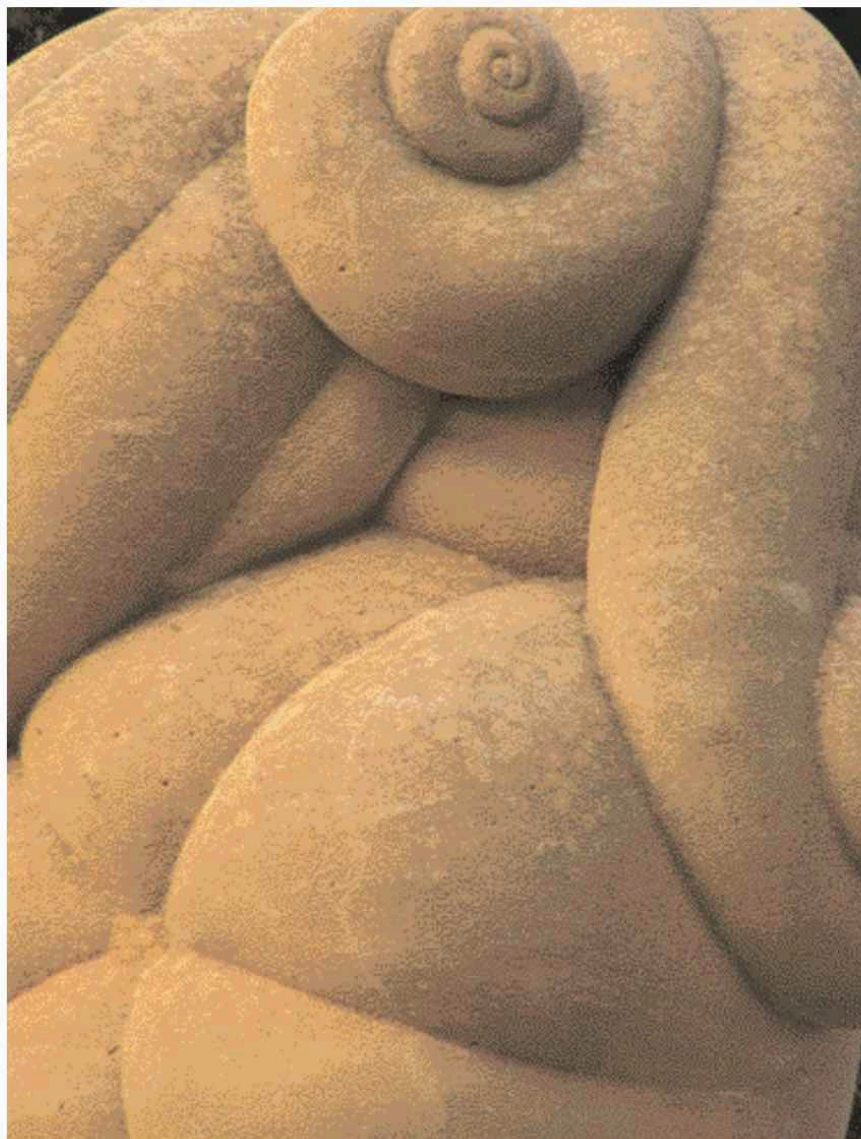


ART • ROSIE PEARSON

## ON FORM



The gatepost at Asthall Manor (detail), by Anthony Turner

PHOTOGRAPH: MALCOLM BUCHANAN-DICK

“When one is in the sphere of the beautiful, no explanations are needed.”

— Constantin Brancusi

IT ALL STARTED with a pair of pumpkins. Well, they weren't pumpkins, really. That was the problem. Nobody was quite sure what they were, the colossal tendrilled forms which I had commissioned my old schoolfriend, Devon-based sculptor Anthony Turner, to carve to top the gateposts of my home in the village of Asthall, in Oxfordshire, UK.

People don't put abstract sculpture on their gateposts in the Cotswolds. They put pineapples, or simple orbs, or something that might be very beautiful – but that is not what I wanted. I wanted something with character, something mysterious but friendly, which welcomed visitors with a promise of the unexpected.

There were complaints to the council, and the local radio station came to investigate, but within weeks indignation was transformed into delight. Local people brought their friends to look at the new sculptures, and a walking couple, on their honeymoon, passed my gates and felt inspired to write to me, telling me that the numinous forms had “lifted our hearts”. Their letter lifted mine.

It was just after I had received this letter that Turner brought his friend and fellow sculptor Dominic Welch to stay. A plot was hatched. We would carry on this transformation. We would see how many more hearts we could lift if we filled this garden with surprising forms of stone. Other sculptors were contacted. *on form* was born.

THIS SUMMER MARKS the third *on form* exhibition of stone sculpture in the garden of Asthall Manor. The original idea has spiralled and grown and taken on a life of its own – rather like the original sculptures.

Thousands of people have come to walk around the sculpture, touching and stroking and marvelling at the stone, its beauty, its smoothness, its age, and the unexpected forms that emerge when it is carved. “Oh, no, I'm not interested in sculpture,” people say, as they arrive. “I've only come to see the garden.” Hours later, they emerge, somewhat dazed, and confess, in varying ways, to having been transported with delight.

Above all, two things seem to have done the trick: the extraordinary relationship the sculpture has established

with the landscape around it, and the fact that it is not asking to be understood with the intellect, but to be engaged with emotionally.

The Windrush Valley, where I live, is easy to love, with the languid meander of its river, its pollarded willows shooting up from their stumps like green fireworks, its soggy water-meadows and its elegant swans. I believe it is because of the way that the work on show strikes up a connection with the landscape that visitors have been able to love the sculpture too.

Perhaps this sculpture is at ease with the landscape because, as the acclaimed sculptor Peter Randall-Page puts it, the carving itself is a kind of journey: “When you're moving across the surface of stone, it's akin to moving through a landscape; it's like walking – your body is kept busy in quite a rhythmic way.” The work of carving and placing stone sculpture is, he says, reassuring in this age, because it shows that, after all, “human beings can have a good relationship with the natural world.”

It begins with having a good relationship with the stone itself. It can be tricky: it cracks, flaws are found, original plans often have to be abandoned and compromises made with the dictates of the stone. Those who work with stone respect it as a partner in the creative project. That is what is special about it: you are not *making something*, but allowing the form to emerge from within the stone itself.

“Carving is a slow process,” says Emma Maiden, a Bristol-based sculptor who is showing her work at Asthall for the first time this year, “but each stage of working reveals new aspects of the stone's nature: the block is square and uncompromising, but as the layers are chipped away the form softens and the material starts to take life.”

I think people are, often unconsciously, recognising this humble relationship between human being and object when they fall in love with a piece of stone sculpture. It is helping them to make sense of their own relationship with the world around them.

People are taken out of their familiar modes of perception because most of the work is hard to place in a category, so that the boundaries between abstract and figurative become irrelevant. These shapes of

stone are evocative of forms and feelings in the natural world. Even if it represents a figure, it is the forms found within the stone, and the feelings those forms conjure, which arrest the attention. It is about what Constantin Brancusi, an influence on all of the *on form* exhibitors, called “the essence of things”.

Stone sculpture also seems to slow people down. Last year, critic Robert Hughes called for a return to “Slow art – art that holds time as a vase holds water”. He must, surely, have been thinking of stone, which literally does hold time, the tiny ancient fossils it contains revealing themselves as the sculptor works.

To the much-admired London-based sculptor Emily Young, the stones with which she works are “kinds of ancestors”. Young is currently working on a project to place a stone angel on every continent, but it is really, she says, the stones themselves which are the angels, in the ancient sense of messengers. “They are made (like us) of particles that were born in starbursts, in galactic winds, in that first big bang ... There's a poetry in them, in their impossibly long slow dance ... They show their history, and thereby ours, and the Earth's and the universe's.”

The people who fall in love with stone sculpture and actually take it home, to be a part of their own life, extend this slow dance into an infinite future. Theirs will be the decision of how much to protect the stone: will it be kept indoors, and polished, developing shiny spots where loving palms rub its contours, allowing its fossils, its whorls and stripes to show? Or will it be placed outside, returned to the elements, weathered in moss and lichen, continuing to grow and change?

One thing is certain: there is a place in the world for art which connects people to their surroundings, awakens their emotions, allows them to feel its meaning, and does not have to be explained. Perhaps the transformation from indignation to delight is really about this: we need not be afraid of art once it speaks to us without words. ●

**on form** runs until 9th July at Asthall Manor, Asthall, Near Burford, Oxfordshire. Tel: 01993 824317. <anna@onformsculpture.co.uk> <www.onformsculpture.co.uk>