

Tactile treasures

Tracy Spiers visits the wonderful Asthall Manor, where they positively encourage visitors to get up close and personal with the exhibits

A couple of years ago I recall gazing up at Michelangelo's impressive David in Florence. Being a dutiful art student at the time, I spent an hour trying to draw this fine specimen of man and sculpture. As I did so I realised that drawing what was before me was so far removed from the actual art of making. I drew with my pencil; this great artist drew with his chisel. He saw a statue and brought it out of the stone, masterfully stripping back with his tools to reveal the beauty within.

That was back in the 16th century, yet that act of looking and seeing something which is not yet reality is a gift that is very much alive in the 21st century. Here in the Cotswolds a unique exhibition devoted only to the work of stone has been taking place since 2004. But unlike other exhibitions, this one has a significant difference - it has a 'please touch', policy to encourage the audience to engage with the exhibits.

On form takes place biennially and has the most incredible backdrop - the beautiful grounds of Asthall Manor, a gabled Jacobean Cotswold manor in the Windrush Valley in Oxfordshire.

It was the vision of Rosie Pearson, who bought the manor almost 20 years ago, to celebrate the work of sculptors and transform her garden into an art gallery. The very first exhibition actually took place in 2002 and included sculptures of a variety of materials. However since 2004, it has been dedicated to stone alone and this year more than 200 sculptures created by 37 sculptors from Britain and abroad, will be on display in Rosie's picturesque setting. It is the task of Rosie and her co-curator Anna Greenacre to consider where to place the works of art, taking into account texture, shape and colour. Over the years On form has grown, both in numbers of sculptors taking part and attending visitors.

"On form begins with the selection process one year before the exhibition opens. We choose our sculptors both from applications and dedicated searches for new talent. We believe visits to sculptors' studios are a key part of understanding the work and this year we have travelled all over the UK, and for the first time to Italy, Switzerland and Holland," explains Anna.

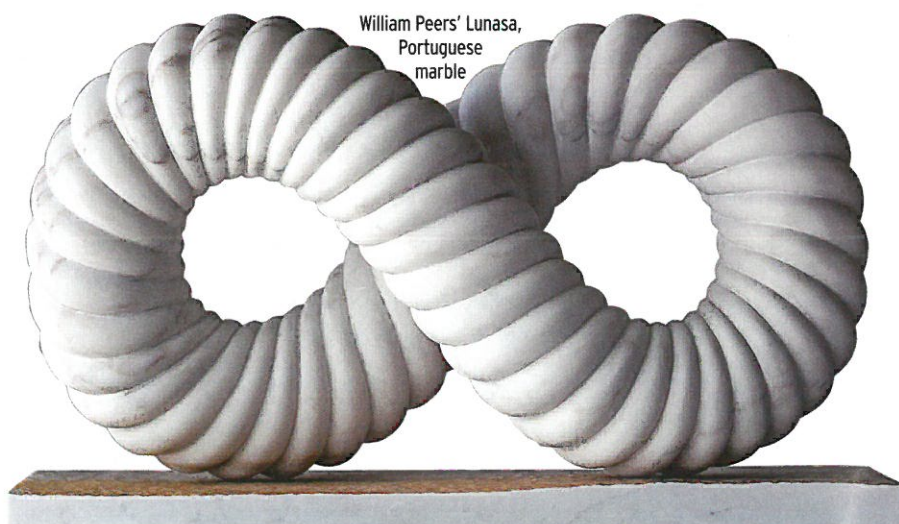
In the autumn, the two curators visited the stunning Fantiscritti Quarry in Carrara where the famous marble has been quarried since Roman times and has long



been a favourite of sculptors, including Michelangelo.

"Our conversations bubble with ideas about a sculpture's form, how a sculptor makes his or her work, or the geological history of a piece of stone. It is such a fascinating part of the job and Rosie and I feel passionately about working with the sculptors to really understand what they are wanting to express," adds Anna.

As an artist myself I am always fascinated - or perhaps unashamedly nosy - to see where others work. Like any studio producing creativity, they vary in size, shape and degrees of tidiness! With studios involving stone, there is a unifying sense of space, respect for health and safety, a high degree of noise and of course dust - regardless of where they are. Studios belonging to on form artists range from a domed space under the railway



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Lucy spends a lot of her working hours on public and private commissions as well as building up fresh collections ready for exhibitions. She is currently working on what she calls “a super human head,” from a 3ft piece of marble for a client.

“This has been great for me as it has taken me out of my comfort zone a bit! I find every aspect of working in stone fascinating. It is exciting to have an idea and then to bring it to life. I don’t always make models first, I often just start working on the stone and see where it goes,” she explains.

Lucy has a total of eight pieces on show at On form which includes her shell and fossil sculptures and an impressive bird, all made from stone she buys and ships in from Pietrasanta in Italy. She also has work on display at The Hannah Peschar Sculpture Garden in Surrey and two of her metal work sculptures feature in an exhibition at Kingham Lodge in the Cotswolds.

As I talk to Lucy, who seems so at home in her studio, I realise that one has to have certain qualities to do this job - a love for hard work, physical labour and a willingness to endure the cold of winter and heat of summer.

A 40-minute drive away, I find another sculptor who is equally fit and as passionate about stone. Kim Francis moved out of her Stroud shed to her studio in Chalford two years ago. Outside her work space is a collection of elegantly carved exquisite forms with clean strong lines. Inside is an eclectic mix of pebble-like stones which one just has to touch. There is a playfulness to some of them as Kim has added extra textures to create something new and exciting. ►

On form sculpture exhibition at Asthall Manor in the Windrush

arches in London to an ancient Cotswold barn.

I drive out to Farmington, near Northleach where I find Lucy Unwin, who has been a previous exhibitor with on form. She rents out a spacious and well-lit barn, overlooking unspoilt countryside. She still manages to look glamorous in her boiler suit and makes her chosen discipline of creating organic sea-inspired forms in marble and onyx look so easy and effortless. Due to the constant noise levels created by her power tools - an air hammer and compressor - she has a permanent set of earplugs in place.

“A lot of people like to listen to music, but I have discovered audio books are great fun and help the day go by.”

Brought up on a farm, Lucy, who lives in Cheltenham, admits she has always loved the outdoors.

“In my teenage years and early twenties I took part in a lot of competitive sports, hockey and athletics which gave me an interest in the anatomy and athletic shapes. I can see this influence coming through in my figurative work,” says Lucy, who studied Fine Art Sculpture at the Winchester School of Art and is also a master of metalwork.

“I have also been mad about the seaside. I love surfing and have been going to Cornwall and Norfolk for many years. I started sculpting the shell forms and they have progressed to fossils. Most marble comes from broken down seashells and I guess I am turning it back into what it was originally.

“I think On form is incredible. To have all stone work together and to see all the diversity in such a wonderful place is amazing. We may all use the same material,



Zarafah by Guy Stevens, and Senator by Paul Vanstone

Brought up in France, Kim says she has always been a maker.

"At college I wanted to do sculpture but the tutors persuaded me to do jewellery. As soon as I left college I picked up a chain saw and started carving wood! But the only trouble with wood is that it moves, so I tried carving stone and put down the chainsaw, much to my children's relief! It is a much more stable material. It requires effort but it does have a grounding quality to it," explains Kim, who like Lucy gets her marble from Italy.

As well as taking part in On form, Kim will be installing a sculpture in bronze in Cossack Square, Nailsworth this summer, which is a commemorative piece cast by Pangolin Editions.

Kim, who wears an old boiler suit sporting the name Science - a reference to her days working for Damien Hirst - enjoys the physical side of working with such weighty material. She has a background in circus skills such as trapeze work so is used to keeping fit. In order to get the best of the stone she works with, she makes 'three dimensional sketches,' using wax or clay.

"Often a design will emerge which does change when working with the marble itself. It is like having a conversation with the stone; even if I have an agenda, I have to sometimes adjust it when working with the real thing.

"You do need a strength of character, determination; and, as it requires quite a lot of labour, you need to really love what you do. But I think stone like marble is a very noble material; it has taken a long time to get to the stage it is in and personally I think it is worth the labour."

The process of getting Asthall Manor ready for On form is an equally long and laborious process. Co-curator Anna Greenacre says it often takes several weeks to install the exhibition and it is a team effort between sculptors, gardeners, lorry drivers, farmers and students.

"We want to delight, surprise and inspire our visitors and this in turn gives us an enormous amount of pleasure. Our 'Please Touch' policy encourages engagement with the sculpture that most galleries and museums cannot offer," says Anna.

"We don't do whispering voices and hushed discussions - we want people to talk openly about their experiences and talk with the artists and ourselves to feel a part of this very special biennial event." ■

On form is on show at Asthall Manor in the Windrush Valley, from Sunday, June 12 to Sunday, July 10 (open 12 noon to 6pm, closed Mondays and Tuesdays; open till 9pm on Thursdays). www.onformsculpture.co.uk

The Mad Hatter bookshop

will once again take up residence in the summer house, and a full schedule of inspiring events, including garden talks, theatre, carving and painting workshops, can be found on the On form website.

Highlights include dusk birdsong walks through the gardens with composer and founder of www.planetbirdsong.org, Peter Cowdrey. Scary Little Girls will return with their innovative site-specific performances, Garden writer Mary Keen will be giving a talk and signing her new book, plus stone carving and painting workshops for adults and children.

Chef, Fiona Cullinane, whom AA Gill has called "one of the very best British, originally Scots, rural cooks" and her team, look forward to welcoming guests to the Potting Shed Café, set in the idyllic walled garden of Asthall Manor. Fiona will transform the 18th Century stone potting shed into a charming eating area. A pretty outdoor area will also be created, a perfect place to enjoy views of the Windrush Valley and watch the bees at work in the wild flower meadow.



Kim Francis in her studio