

*Alchemilla mollis* spills onto a path that leads to *Reaching*, a sculpture by Vanessa Paschakarnis on display in 2018.

# *Taking* SHAPE

Rosie Pearson has created a sumptuous garden around historic Asthall Manor, the perfect setting for her biennial exhibition of stone sculpture, *On Form*

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Climbing roses smother the mellow walls of the manor house, the soft stone glowing in the early morning light.



I had always thought of Asthall as a special place; it was lodged in my memory from looking at photographs of the Mitford family – the six famous sisters with their brother Tom, their parents standing like brackets on either end of the line of sleek-haired children, always stylishly dressed in tweeds. Asthall had produced one of the 20th century’s, wittiest, most knowing writers, Nancy, after all, as well as the transformative chatelaine of Chatsworth, Deborah. Of course the garden at Asthall was beautiful. My imagination dictated that it had always been so. When I heard it was possible to visit it when it opens to the public every two years for its On Form sculpture exhibition and sale, I jumped at the chance.

I was right to jump; right to visit. But I was wrong about it long being one of our great gardens. Now, yes, absolutely. It is heady-making in its loveliness – the roses! The river! The generosity of the planting! – but this is a recent development. “Garden?” Asthall’s owner, Rosie Pearson, queries when I ask if that’s why she bought the house in the first place. “There wasn’t one!”

**Above** During the exhibition, sculpture can be found throughout the garden; together with the neighbouring church, it’s an idyllic backdrop. **Below** A vintage caravan makes an unusual focal point in the woodland.



She pauses. “There were some lovely mature trees and a few bulbs and some lawn, but nothing else. It was Asthall’s location that I fell in love with; the lushness and magic of the valley it sits in. I remember driving across the top of the valley and thinking: ‘Wouldn’t it be wonderful to live here one day?’ But when I did buy it, at the end of 1997, I panicked – it seemed too big a job – and I took my children back to Jamaica, where they were born.”

Rosie was right to feel daunted. When you look at the Mitford photographs, you don’t really see the garden. You just assume it must lie beyond the stone steps where they so often seemed to be photographed. Asthall’s next occupant was a farmer and vintage car collector who didn’t do much to the garden other than plant bulbs by night using a head torch. And then came Rosie. “There wasn’t even a front drive when I bought the house,” she remembers. “That’s how unfriendly it was. I wanted it to be the opposite. I wanted it to be welcoming – to invite people in.”

The front gates, then, weren’t an insignificant feature of the garden, which itself was being taken in hand



by garden designers Isabel and Julian Bannerman – the perfect choice for Asthall because Rosie’s first impression was correct. Its location, hidden within a valley, was wonderful – but almost impossible. The garden required imagination and know-how in equal measure. “The Windrush Valley is very special,” says Isabel Bannerman, “but Asthall was a difficult site because the hillside slopes into the back of the house, and it was super gloomy in the beginning. Rosie was terrified we were going to overdo it, but in fact it is possibly our best garden and that is largely due to it being a successful collaboration with Rosie, which has gone on and developed and flourished.”

It has flourished, and Rosie’s own vision has been fundamental. Having worked in her professional life as a journalist and teacher, Rosie has been fearless in developing Asthall not just as a garden but a real locus: a place that brings together all kinds of people, of all ages, to explore her garden, yes, but also to learn, to touch, to be surprised, to discover. It began, fittingly, with the gates: “I’ve always collected

odd things,” Rosie explains. “And just as I was trying to decide what to do with the gates – I didn’t want pineapples on each side, you see those all over the Cotswolds – an artist friend of mine, Anthony Turner, dropped by. He had some sculptures in the back of his van, including a sort of pumpkin gone mad – a *Plumpkin* – and as soon as I saw it, I knew it would be perfect. I commissioned Anthony to make me two *Plumpkins* for the gates, and when he and a friend of his, sculptor Dominic Welch, came to install them, they both said: ‘Well, this would be a good place for a sculpture exhibition.’”

And so On Form was born. This was in 2002 and the first exhibition consisted of seven sculptures brought to the garden by Welch and Turner. Now, 18 years later, On Form usually exhibits pieces from at least 30, if not more, sculptors. Since 2006 the exhibition has been curated by Anna Greenacre (she was also responsible for the brilliant Art Unbound at Painswick Rococo Garden in 2019), and the artists she has found and selected come from as far away

**Below** John Isherwood’s monumental piece, *The Singer of Tales* makes a statement on the lawn, surrounded by roses in early summer.



**Above** Anthony Turner’s marble sculpture *OK Bean* sits in front of wave-shaped hedging. **Above right** A lazy mill stream threads its way gently through the Windrush Valley. **Right** *Cycladic Moon* by Dominic Welch is offset beautifully by a haze of meadow flowers.



as Japan – although there are more local artists who participate. The pieces vary enormously in terms of size, price and concept.

“Nature is always an inspiration for the sculptors,” remarks Anna, “but this year there are pieces that tackle subjects as diverse as technology, the environment and female sexuality.” What unites the work, aside from the high level of quality and craftsmanship, is that they are all made of stone. “I made that decision in 2004,” Rosie explains. “No one else was doing it, and I love stone. It can be the most challenging medium to work with, but it’s also the one that slows people down. It’s wonderful to say, yes, please do touch the work.”

In 2018, at the last On Form, more than 10,000 people visited Asthall and touched the sculptures – including me. I even bought a piece of work, which was entirely unplanned. It’s a wonderful exhibition, a brilliant reminder that sculpture in your garden or indeed your home (Anna has a large hunk of Parmesan cheese carved out of stone that sits on her kitchen table all year round) needn’t be tricky.

It’s easy to dismiss sculpture as either something for big estates – follies that need building and monoliths that need installing – or as verging into the twee. Not so at Asthall. On Form is an inspiring lesson in the many ways a sculpture can enhance your garden, whatever its size, whether it acts to draw you into the garden, or as a punctuation point to surprise you, psychologically at least, out of it. A sculpture can help anchor a particular spot or provide an interesting juxtaposition. It’s also a beautiful, pleasing, interesting thing: something imagined, laboured over and painstakingly brought into being – never more so than in stone.

What On Form teaches you about the possibilities of sculpture and how it works in different settings is just one of its pleasures. The grounds here at Asthall are big and varied enough to include all kinds of settings from the wild and natural to the beautifully manicured, and the grounds are worth visiting in their own right. And the exhibition will also, literally, teach you about sculpture and stone. Normally, carving classes, as well as painting and creative writing workshops run alongside the exhibition, as well as a pop-up bookshop, and a restaurant in The Potting Shed that makes use of



**Top** A summerhouse presides over the swimming pool, with reeds and waterlilies. **Above** Goat-like *Reaching* by Vanessa Paschakarnis, part of her *Capricorno* series of sculptures.

the vegetables and herbs grown in Asthall’s walled vegetable garden.

It all sounds so good, doesn’t it? And it is. Asthall may not have always been one of our great gardens. You know how it is: they jostle for space in your head – a list of places you long to visit and explore – but it is now. Isabel Bannerman, who is ever illuminating, sums it up best. “Rosie has always taken a very ecological approach at Asthall, as well as having a great sense of aesthetic beauty and understatement. All of this, plus her amazing gardeners and the On Form biennale have created an incredible new life in the old place.”

**Asthall Manor, Burford, Oxfordshire OX18 4HW.** Due to the current situation, 2020’s On Form exhibition will now take place online only. Visit the website from the exhibition opening date, 13 June, to see the work of all 36 sculptors who would have displayed their pieces in Asthall Manor’s garden this summer (find out more over the page). The gardens at Asthall Manor will open when guidelines allow. Please check the website for details. Tel: 01993 824319; [onformsculpture.co.uk](http://onformsculpture.co.uk)

# On Form 2020

Exhibition curator Anna Greenacre reveals the stone sculptors and pieces she's looking forward to showcasing this year

Although visitors won't be able to visit the sculpture in Asthall Manor's gardens as usual this year, Anna's beautifully curated exhibition is still available to view, virtually, at [onformsculpture.co.uk](http://onformsculpture.co.uk), where she aims to have photographs and videos of all the work that would have been on display, for all the sculptors taking part.

"On Form's unique selling point is our 'do touch' policy," says Anna, "and, of course, with it being a virtual exhibition that's not going to be possible, but the website is a wonderful platform for us to show off all the beautiful work in a new and exciting way."

Anna is particularly excited by the themes that have emerged from 2020's collection of work. The environment, endangered species and our throwaway culture have all come under the scrutiny of the artists, including Tom Waugh, a classically trained sculptor who uses traditional materials and techniques to create contemporary statements. His tubes of toothpaste and pill packets – carved from realistic white marble to look just like plastic or polystyrene – represent the number of objects a person can discard in one lifetime. "Tom's work is really interesting. He's effectively turning everyday, 21st-century objects into fossils," Anna says.

Other sculptors have turned to nature for their inspiration, such as Ben Russell, a stone carver and letter cutter based in Dorset. "Ben is very keen on the underworld of the woods and the forest, the way mushrooms send out messages to each other through the

**Clockwise from top** *Dreaming Head* by Emma Maiden; Almuth Tebbenhoff's 2m tall *Waterflow*; Tom Waugh works on *Big Pharma*; Ben Russell's *Messenger*; Peter Randall-Page's *Granite Dreaming* weighs in at 4.28 tonnes.



mycelium – nature's website," Anna explains. "Then there are sculptors like Peter Randall-Page, Anthony Turner, Lucy Unwin and Dominic Welch, who take inspiration from seeds, pods and shells, looking at the patterns nature creates and the abstract forms, amazing richness and variety of life."

Anne Cecile Surga won On Form's bursary for 2020, for sculptors under the age of 35. Born in France, she explores the challenges faced by women in their private lives through her sculpture. Her current series of marble pieces with traces of fingertips running through the stone, was partly inspired by a visit to Auschwitz. Born in Germany, Almuth Tebbenhoff scoops, chisels and cuts Carrara marble to uncover its delicate translucency, creating objects that represent her take on the unending mysteries of life and the universe. "Almuth's *Waterflow* is a huge, beautiful piece, over 2m tall, which is rather amazing – it would probably have gone on the front lawn," says Anna.

This is just a small selection of the work that will be online to view in June. "I think they're all wonderful," says Anna, of the sculptors who are taking part in On Form this year, albeit in a different format to the open-air exhibition at



Asthall Manor they anticipated. "We're still trying to make it as dynamic and interactive as possible," she says. "The dream is to have videos of every work so people can really get a feel for what the sculpture is like at all angles." ■

