

## Please do touch

Britain's only exhibition dedicated to stone sculpture is about to open its ninth show. Mary Miers is fascinated by the process of installation

EVERY other year, for a few weeks in May, the serenity of the Windrush Valley in the Cotswolds is disrupted by a succession of vans and lorries trundling along the narrow lanes with deliveries for Asthall Manor. All day long, as mowers and strimmers whine and whirr, curators, carvers and gardeners busy themselves about the premises, unpacking wooden crates, wheeling pallet trucks, pruning borders and gathering into small groups for intense discussions. Beside a gantry, a sculptor wields a die grinder over a piece of Portuguese granite as local farmer Phil Walker telehandles a sling-borne block of stone from the helm of his Manitou tractor.

‘It would be difficult to imagine a more dreamy setting for sculpture’

Such is the scene of activity during the installation of ‘On Form’. The biennial sculpture show was founded by Rosie Pearson in 2002 and, this year, it’s shaping up to be one of the most exciting. Nearly 400 works by 40 sculptors (with prices ranging from £80 to £150,000) will be complemented by music, poetry, film, birdsong walks and workshops.

It would be difficult to imagine a more dreamy setting in which to celebrate sculpture in stone than the weathered, golden-grey buildings of this ‘archetypal ancient Cotswold manor house, hard by the church, a garden descending to the river Windrush, with the prettiest village imaginable and farms to match,’



Jon Isherwood's striped granite *Singer of Tales* dominates the view along the front terrace to *Strange Fruit* by Mark Stonestreet and one of Vanessa Paschakarnis's horn pieces, *Reaching*

as the late Duchess of Devonshire described her childhood home, famous for its association with the Mitfords (COUNTRY LIFE, *September 23, 2009*). Since moving here in 1997, Rosie has transformed the garden with the help of Julian and Isabel Bannerman, creating yew topiary imitating wedges and Hokusai waves, a box terrace with diagonal vistas and tilted parterres.

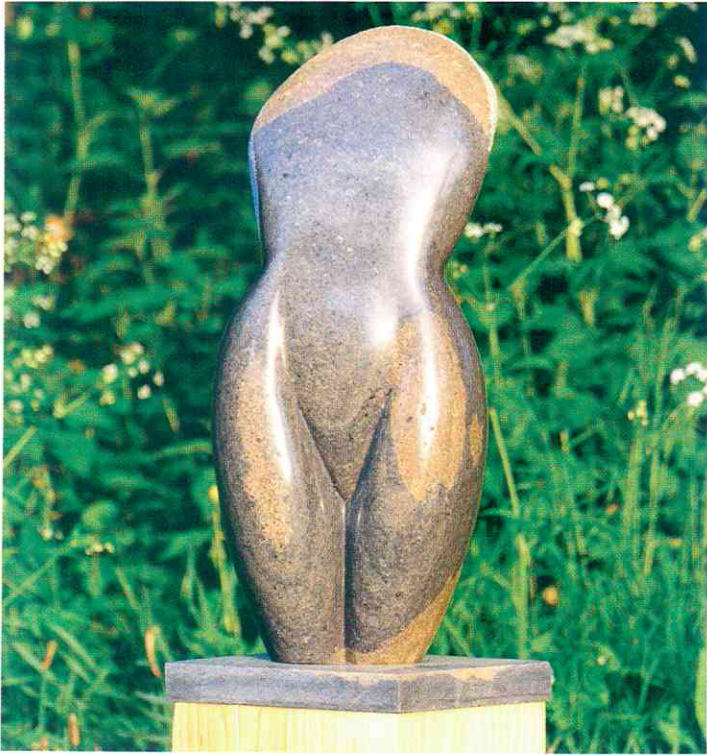
Already, many works are in situ, with poles marking the sites of others still to come; hedges have been trimmed, flowerbeds weeded and paths

mown through the woods and across the water meadow. ‘I actually cried this morning as I was walking round at 6.45am,’ says head gardener Jenny Barnes, pulling out dead daffodils to expose Alison Munby’s *Woodlouse* against a great froth of cow parsley.

‘It’s a beautiful show to be part of,’ says Nicolas Moreton, whose fertility totems carved from Indian red granite stand sentinel beside the river. ‘It’s so unusual to get to meet fellow contributors, to share experiences, technological challenges

and equipment,’ he adds. The sculptors were all invited to lunch at Asthall three months ago, so they could discuss their work and familiarise themselves with the gardens. ‘I find it extraordinary how, at most sculpture parks, artists simply hand over their work and say “site it where you want”,’ remarks co-curator Anna Greenacre. At Asthall, a spirit of camaraderie and collaboration pervades.

Rosie and Anna have spent months visiting studios as far afield as Italy—five sculptors from a workshop in Pietrasanta



A semi-figurative sculpture by Aly Brown: *Gala*, in Purbeck blue

are showing this year—and drawing up their final selection. ‘We’ve got to introduce fresh blood and the work has got to come from the heart,’ says Rosie, naming some of the exhibitors reflecting the show’s different axes: stone masons-turned-fine artists Alex Wenham and Ben Russell, figurative sculptors such as David Klein and conceptualists, notably the Canadian John Greer. Each artist is expected to contribute a range of works, including smaller pieces for display inside, where three gallery spaces include the ballroom fictionalised in *The Pursuit of Love* by Nancy Mitford, who had her 18th-birthday dance here.

Although Rosie was inspired to establish ‘On Form’ after commissioning a pair of gatepost finials from her old school-friend—now partner—Anthony Turner, she stresses that it’s accidental that sculpture is the vehicle. ‘At the risk of sounding pretentious, what ‘On Form’ is really about is freedom and open-mindedness. We’re not trying to appeal to high-heeled art consultants; we want to get away from the pedestal mystique and encourage people to touch

the stone, to think about these pieces and their creators and consider how they relate to each other and to the landscape.’

## ‘The curators have a remarkable eye for knowing where to place a piece’

‘On Form’ achieves this through creative, rather than provocative, installation. Even Tom Waugh’s giant cigarette butts—a protest against litter—recline in an old stone trough spilling silver-grey leaves and white star flowers—cerastium, sedum and sinccio, specially planted to imitate ash.

Siting, of course, is the key, and a huge map plotted with thumbnails of each exhibit testifies to the care that goes into this. A brief call on the walkie-talkie summons Rosie to the front lawn, where a debate is in full flow over the placing of Vanessa Paschakarnis’s Capricorn heads. There’s much talk of ‘breathing space’ and I’m inclined to sympathise with

Guy Stevens, who has already installed his 6ft-limestone spiral to create a lovely counterpoint for the church tower against a backdrop of *Rubus* Benenden and *Philadelphus*. Now, flanked by the two bone-white horn carvings, it seems suddenly smaller. He’s placed four pieces today, but Guy sets up his tripod yet again to move *What’s happened* 3ft to the left to see if the grouping works better.

A roar at the gates heralds the arrival of a pantechinon bearing a lone block of granite under a blanket. This is Peter Randall-Page’s *Envelope of Pulsation* and there’s a lot of hanging around as the nine-tonne sculpture is winched into position under a weeping birch tree. The curators have a remarkable eye for knowing where to place a piece and how best to orientate it. What appeared to be a lifeless slab is transformed by sunlight, its vermiculated surface dancing with the same oranges and greys as the tree trunk.

Another sculptor arrives with a friend to install four ‘protest pieces’ based on endangered species. ‘I know one’s going into the church and one in the graveyard; the other two are

mysteries,’ announces this year’s bursary recipient, Emma Elliott. She joins the growing number of female sculptors now showing at ‘On Form’—17 this year, including Bridget McCrum and the internationally renowned Helaine Blumenfeld.

From Ben Russell’s giant mushroom splayed across a lawn to Aly Brown’s swan-necked *Calyx* riding on the meadow grasses, the stones draw visitors out into the landscape, with surprises at every turn. Garden-lovers and children, too, will relish an afternoon spent wandering around Asthall’s 14 acres, with their gypsy caravan and plant-lined pool, treehouse and thatched gazebo, earthmounds and Potting Shed Café.

And then there’s the church, where the richly worked tombs of the Cotswolds wool merchants contribute a wonderful sense of continuity to this celebration of contemporary carving in stone.

*‘On Form’ is at Asthall Manor, Asthall, Burford, Oxfordshire, June 10–July 8 (01993 824319; [www.onformsculpture.co.uk](http://www.onformsculpture.co.uk))*

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Anthony Turner’s *Cheeky Peas* suggests the abundance of Nature