

Experience 'on form 18', the 9th biennial exhibition of sculpture in stone

June 14, 2018 | Theresa Thompson

Set in the beautiful house and grounds of Asthall Manor, Oxfordshire, 'on form 18' is the only UK exhibition dedicated exclusively to stone sculpture. With over 400 pieces on view, visitors are positively encouraged to touch the art. But hurry, it finishes on 8th July.



Alex Wenham, *Armadillo* (Peter van den Berg)

For most of the time Asthall is a small, sleepy village on the eastern edge of the Cotswolds in Oxfordshire, a couple of miles along the pretty Windrush Valley from Burford. Then, every two years it takes on a new life as Asthall Manor and its gardens become the showcase for one of the most delightful and varied exhibitions of contemporary sculpture in stone you are ever likely to come across.

Forty sculptors have been selected, exhibiting nearly 400 pieces between them. But don't for a minute imagine a crowded scene of sculptures vying for space within pristine white walled galleries. No, imagine instead 14 acres of beautiful gardens and riverside meadows, from exuberant scented borders to luxuriant wildflower fields, set around a manor dating from the 17th century that was once home to the Mitford sisters, plus the adjoining churchyard, all dotted with artworks from world-renowned and upcoming stone sculptors. The sculptors are from the UK, mostly, and also Italy, Greece, Canada, the Netherlands and the US.

Rosie Pearson, on form's founder, and co-curator Anna Greenacre show great sensitivity in positioning the artworks, so that walking around, map in hand, is a gloriously uplifting experience. Whether it's a sculpture seen from afar, peeping above the meadow grasses, or discovering one unexpectedly on a winding woodland path, there are delights and surprises everywhere.

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Nicolas Moreton, Jon Isherwood, Vanessa Paschakarnis (Peter van den Berg)

Stone of all hues, all kinds, carved into all manner of forms and configurations engage the eye and sensibilities. Chunks of limestone, marble, granite, alabaster, and so on, re-imagined as swirls of kelp, snails, stars, eggshells, pea pods, abstracts, figures and faces, origami boats or butterflies...

One of the first pieces I came across was a Giant Woodlouse, curled up into a ball among cow parsley near the entrance. Carved out of a dark Kilkenny limestone, it was the work of Oxfordshire sculptor Alison Munby. Like many artists here, Alison takes her cues from nature. She wants to recreate some of that childhood wonder in the natural world, she said. It worked, reminding me of childishly playing with woodlice, following them along the floor, and making them roll into a ball. Now I followed the curves of the sculpture's rolypoly segmented form with my fingertips, enjoying the deliciously smooth stone, the warmth it had absorbed from the sun, and delighting in the very idea of stroking a woodlouse.



Helaine Blumenfeld, Allegro (Peter van den Berg)

And yes, I could touch the sculptures. Rather wonderfully, 'Please do Touch' is the policy at Asthall. As a previous visitor said: "...if you can't touch a piece of sculpture you are missing a whole world of experience."

The patterns of nature inform much of the work, from the spiral of snail shells to the geometry of pine cones. Down by the lake an unusual sculpture, worked by Alison in a honey-coloured Cotswold limestone is based on a Banksia pod (or cone) that comes from southwestern Australia. Banksia is a plant genus named after the 18th-century naturalist and explorer Sir Joseph Banks (1743-1820) who voyaged with James Cook aboard *Endeavour*.

Alex Wenham plays with nature in his sculptures. His witty Armadillo finials in Portland limestone and Hare & Tortoise waterspouts are a great example. For now, while Rob Good's chickens peck round the gypsy caravan, his cloud sculpture, *Sogno d'Altezza*, made of Carrara marble, appears to float over the lawn; and beside the river, *Sogno di Luce* in white and grey

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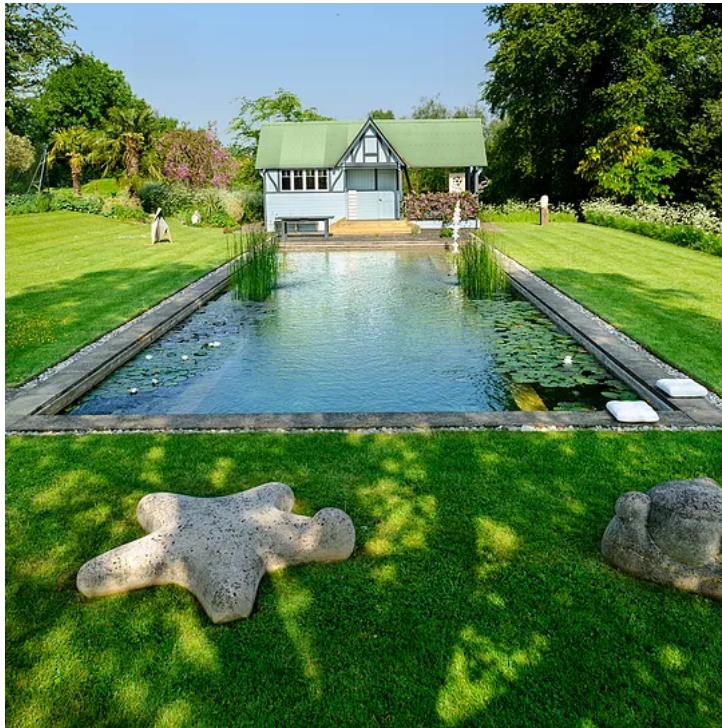
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veined Calacatta marble cleverly recreates the shifting gap in the clouds that briefly lets through the sun's rays.



Pool house (Peter van den Berg)

Meanwhile, Ben Russell's fungi crop up all over the place as mushrooms do - a giant mushroom here on a lawn, made of limestone, smaller fungi there, in brown or white alabaster.

Exhibitors in this year's show include: Helaine Blumenfeld OBE, Peter Randall-Page RA, Guy Stevens, Anthony Turner, Lucy Unwin, Paul Vanstone, and Rise Art Award winner for 2018, Tom Waugh. Tom's hyper-realistic sculptures made of stone and marble, of everyday objects like a paper takeaway bag and a crushed can, a squashed box, and giant cigarette butts form a teasing counterbalance to nature. They casually litter the place, on a garden table in a corner, on a wall, or 'dropped' in a flowerbed.

Sculptures aside, the gardens at Asthall Manor are among the most beautiful in the Cotswolds. Rosie Pearson moved here in 1998, after a decade spent living in Jamaica. Dating from the 1600s, Asthall Manor is a Jacobean house previously lived in by the infamous Mitford sisters and their family. It was here that Nancy Mitford penned much of *Love in a Cold Climate*, and the Mitford sisters are buried in the churchyard of the neighbouring village of Swinbrook. Having inherited 6 acres of what then was mostly unloved lawn Rosie promptly commissioned the garden designers Julian and Isabel Bannerman to reinstate the house to its rural setting by "allowing the planting to blend with the surrounding landscape".

"Sculpture in stone gives a peculiar sense of grounding," said Rosie, "perhaps because of the time embedded within it. The stillness of the sculpture provides a focus against which the exuberant growth of the plants can be enjoyed. And the process of carving stone is similar to gardening - there is the same dedication and solitude involved in turning something natural into a form."



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Budding Venus by Nicolas Moreton (Peter van den Berg)



Asthall Manor is not open to the public except during the weeks of the stone sculpture show. An extensive events programme includes talks, performances (for example, including some popular Mitford walks), concerts, geology, birdsong and garden tours, and workshops from poetry to stone carving. Throughout the month chef Fiona Cullinane is running the popular Potting Shed Café, with seasonal meals sourced mainly from Asthall Manor. The artworks are for sale - prices in the region of £75 to 45,000.

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10 June – 8 July 2018 (Opening hours: Wed-Sun, 11am to 6pm. Closed Mon and Tues)



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