

On Form Curators
Rosie Pearson (left)
and the owner of
Asthall Manor
Anna Greenacre

Photograph:
Mark Hensworth

Getting a feel for stone

Nicola Lisle previews
this year's *On Form*
sculpture exhibition
at Asthall Manor

Not many sculptors expect to be put on bird poo patrol. But part of the ethos of Asthall Manor's biennial on form exhibition - the only exhibition in the UK dedicated to stone sculpture - is that the artists help run the show, from setting up to front desk duties.

Checking exhibits for bird poo is one of the less glamorous tasks, but one that helps to keep the exhibition running smoothly and ensures that visitors see the exhibits in optimum condition.

This is particularly important given Asthall's policy of encouraging visitors to touch the exhibits, so that they can appreciate their different shapes, textures and temperatures, and perhaps be surprised at the sheer variety of stones and how they interact with each other and the landscape.

One of Asthall Manor's strengths is that it thrives on the unexpected. *On Form* is a remarkable synthesis of old and new, with

contemporary stone sculptures set against the backdrop of a traditional 17th century Cotswold manor that was once famously home to the Mitford family.

The gardens play their part, too. They were transformed in 1998 by Julian and Isabel Bannerman, and again reflect the coming together of contrasting elements, with a fusion of formality and spontaneity flowing down to the River Windrush in glorious harmony. Its panoply of hillocks, arbours, nooks and crannies make perfect settings for the stone sculptures.

On Form was conceived in 2002 by the manor's current owner, Rosie Pearson, inspired by the astonished reaction of locals to the pumpkin-like finials she had commissioned from sculptor Anthony Turner for the entrance gateposts.

The first exhibition had about 50 sculptures and attracted around 1,000 visitors; this year there will be over 200 sculptures and, based in

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Sky Gazers by Paul Vanstone.
Inset, Ribbon Profile and Rainforest Giants also by Paul Vanstone

Photographs: Mark Hemsworth



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the 2012 figures, Rosie is expecting at least 7,000 visitors.

Catching up with Rosie during installation week, I detect a palpable air of excitement and anticipation as sculptors begin to arrive with their work. The scene appears chaotic, but in fact Rosie and curator Anna Greenacre have everything worked out with military precision months in advance, deciding exactly where to place each exhibit.

"Anna and I have spent weeks walking round the garden with our file of all the pictures of what's coming," Rosie tells me as we tour the grounds. "When you have a whole exhibition every inch matters, so it is really important that everything is in exactly the right position.

"It is such fun to do. I like it because it is a puzzle but there isn't a right or wrong answer. I love things that do not have right or wrong answers. There are infinite different ways you can do it.

"We also have to prepare the spaces. We've got one sculpture coming that's got bright red paint on it, and we thought it would be quite fun to put it in the holly bush arbor. We do not want the sculptor to be insulted by it being too hidden away, so we want to make it really inviting."

Sometimes sculptures do not look right in their planned positions, but for Rosie this

experimentation is all part of the fun. As we pass one of the exhibits – an elegant, limestone piece called *Zarafah*, by Guy Stevens – Rosie decides that it does not stand out enough and needs to be moved.

But she is delighted with the placement of one of Guy's other pieces, *Patrick*, a starfish-shaped sculpture which stands in splendid isolation on a grassy mound, and with a female form rising gracefully from the pool.

One of the largest exhibits is *The Madonna and Child* by Matthew Spender.

"We wanted this to be in the church but then realised it was too big to get there, so we've got it looking at the church instead," Rosie explains.

This year's artists were selected from over 100 hopeful applicants, which Rosie had to whittle down to 30. "It was really hard," she admitted. "And it is not just to do with your favourite ones, it's also ones that are going to be an interesting mix."

Rosie always aims for a blend of as many different styles, genres and stones as possible.

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Event highlights

June 13: *On Form at the Ashmolean.* Three on form sculptors talk about the works that have inspired them in the museum's collections

June 15 & 20: Geology Tour led by Philip Howell, Honorary Associate Curator of the Oxford University of Natural History

June 15: Concert by Lower Windrush Choral Society, St Nicholas Church
Music by Handel, Purcell, Stamford and Elgar

June 20: National Garden Scheme open evening

June 22: Cuddington Youth Drama present *Drama Amongst the Stones*

June 25: Oxford School of Drama presents *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

July 3: Oxford School of Drama presents scenes from *Pericles* in various parts of the garden

July 4: Talk by Isabel Bannerman, one of the designers of Asthall Manor gardens

July 4: Scary Little Girls presents *The Ghosts in the Stones* — a living literature event

■ There will also be painting and carving workshops, talks, demonstrations, regular tours by the curators, daily film showings and, by request, guided blindfold tours to develop the sense of touch. Most of these events are free — visit the On Form website www.onformsculpture.co.uk for details and booking.

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"Sometimes you suddenly realise you have got too much white marble or too many heads. We're a bit more figurative this year, so we have five actual bodies or torsos but so many other pieces are based on the human form. And what I love is that sometimes you can't quite tell if something is abstract or figurative, but it reminds you of something."

There are practical considerations, too. "The ones who have been before make installation easier because they know how to do it. They know the gardener, and you don't have to give them so much attention. But we want new ones as well to keep it fresh."

One artist who is familiar with on form is Aly Brown, who is making her second appearance at Asthall Manor this year, but was also involved in the inaugural on form in London in 2013.

"It is just brilliant," she said. "It is so lovely to meet fellow sculptors and combine our work together, and it is all so different. Normally we all work on our own at home, then we come here and it is a total community."

"Rosie does a lunch in March when we all get to know each other, then everybody helps each other set up. So it is great, a real fellowship of artists. It is so amazing to look at bits of stone that are all so different, and the setting here just lends itself beautifully."

"There is something about stone, the sensuality of it, the feel of it. It is so wonderful here that everybody can go and touch the stones. All the people that come here love art. There is always somewhere to look and there is always something placed beautifully."

Aly began stone carving 16 years ago, specialising in abstract female forms, mainly in Portland stone, marble and alabaster.

"It was like a duck to water," she said. "There is something about stone, the sensuality of it, the feel of it. It is so wonderful here that everybody can go and touch the stones. And all the people that come here love art. There is always somewhere to look and there is always something placed beautifully."

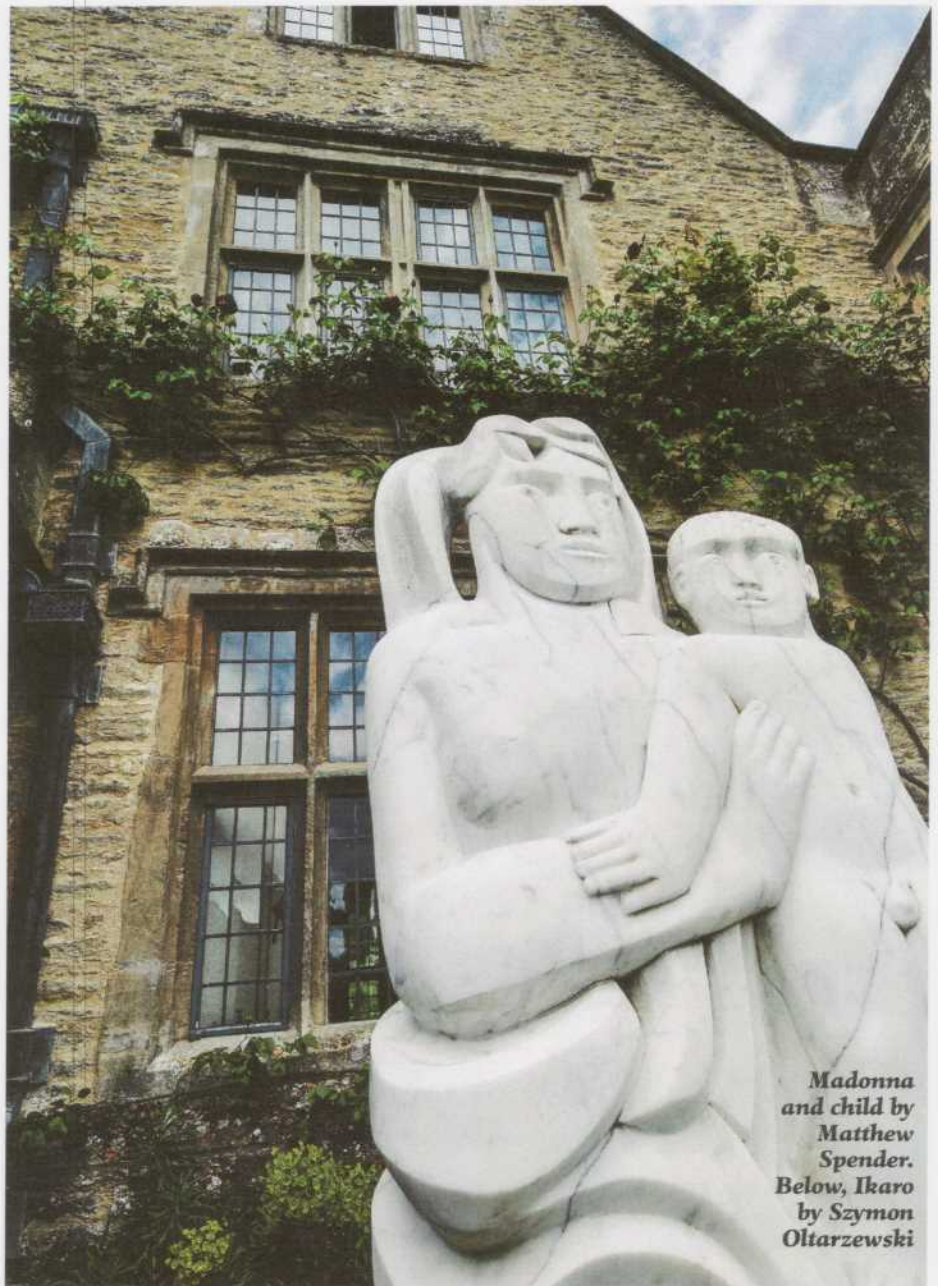
The sculpture rising from the pool is, I now discover, one of Aly's pieces, and she is thrilled with its placing.

"When I saw the swimming pool, I just wanted to have a piece in that. They made it last year into a natural pool as opposed to a swimming pool, and I just felt a piece would go there so well."

Aly is giving carving workshops this year, and will be one of three sculptors giving talks at the Ashmolean Museum on June 13 about how the museum's collections have influenced their work – a new event for this year.

"I do not normally do that sort of talk!" she laughed. "I went with my husband on a recce and there were so many pieces to choose from. The inspiration there was just wonderful to see. There are some stunning pieces."

"The Ashmolean is so beautifully laid out.



Madonna and child by Matthew Spender. Below, Ikaro by Szymon Oltarzewski

It was my first visit there, and I cannot wait to go back."

Also new this year is a series of garden talks by high-profile speakers, Shakespeare in the garden with the Oxford School of Drama and an appearance by the Mad Hatter's Bookshop of Burford.

Favourite events from 2012 are back, including site-specific theatre by Scary Little Girls, the Potting Shed Café and a busy programme of workshops, demonstrations and guided tours.

As in previous years, all works are for sale.



■ **On Form runs at Asthall Manor from June 8 to July 6. Open Wednesday to Sunday, 12 noon to 6pm; Potting Shed Café open 11am - 6pm; The Mad Hatter's Bookshop open Friday to Sunday, 12 noon to 6pm. Admission £7.50 (includes full colour catalogue); concessions available. Asthall Manor, Asthall, Burford OX18 4HW. Call 01993 824319, www.onformsculpture.co.uk**