

Please *DO* touch

Theresa Thompson is bowled over by an exhibition which celebrates stone



On Form 2014 stone sculptures in the gardens at Asthall Manor

Stone sculptures of all shapes and sizes are once again coming to Oxfordshire this month in On Form 16 at Asthall Manor, near Burford.

The UK's only exhibition dedicated entirely to sculpture in stone, it's the eighth such event, staged biennially in the picturesque grounds overlooking the Windrush Valley.

Now larger and more diverse than ever, this year it is showing more than 200 works by 39 sculptors from all over the UK, besides Norway, Switzerland, Italy, and the Netherlands.

The 17th century manor, which was once the childhood home of the Mitford sisters, is now home to On Form's founder Rosie Pearson and her family.

In preparation for the show, Rosie and curator Anna Greenacre spent last summer and autumn travelling around the UK and Europe, visiting more than 130 artists'

studios, searching for sculptors whose work demonstrates real commitment to stone, as well as exceptional quality and distinctiveness.

Visitors, entering the grounds past dramatic gatepost finials sculpted by Anthony Turner, soon realise that this is an exhibition with a difference.

The show's enchanting "please do touch" policy says it all.

"It's crucial to touch them," says Rosie.

So, not only can visitors enjoy wandering around four acres of beautiful quintessentially English garden – designed by Julian and Isabel Bannerman – and discover sculptures made of stone from far and wide, but they can also delight in the feel of them under their fingers.

A lot of thought goes into placement, and, established artists show their work alongside upcoming talent.

There will be stone worked in all manner of ways: limestone carved into smooth curves gracing a lawn; circles of granite

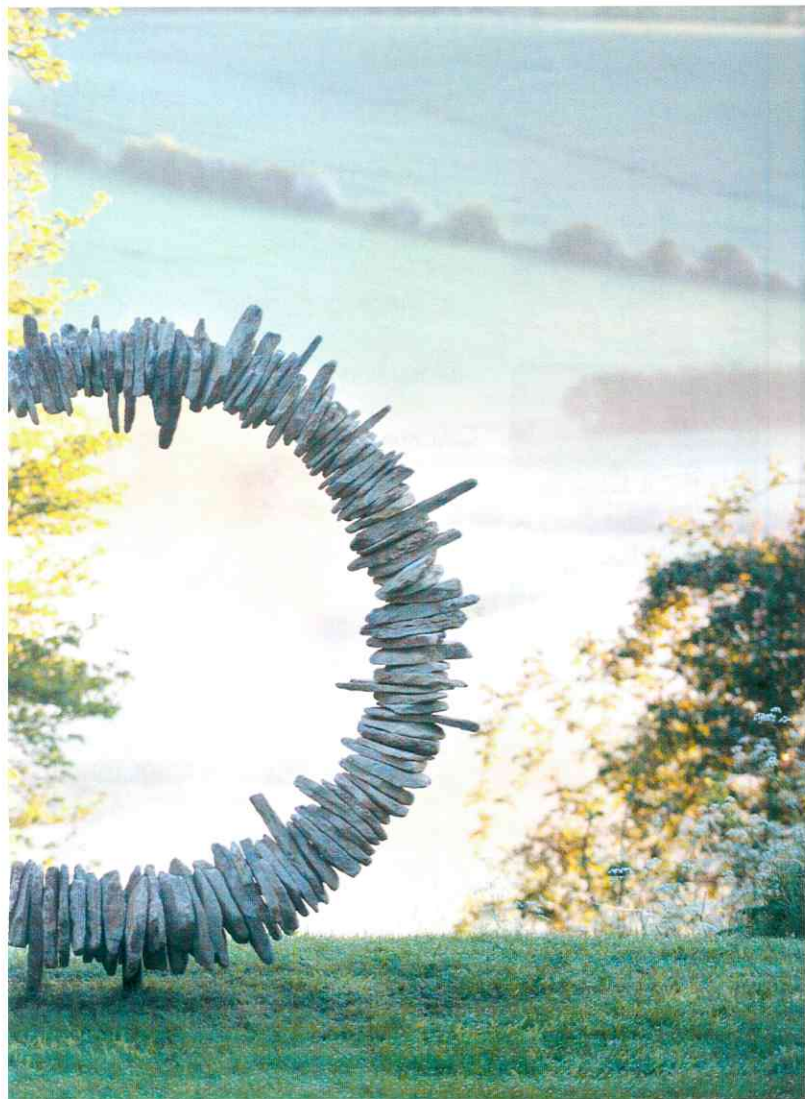
capturing a vista; rough-hewn pieces retaining the marks of nature; organic forms, architectural, geometric forms, figures and silhouettes; shapes that wouldn't look out of place in prehistoric settings.

On Form always has something new to offer. This year, the Ballroom takes on a new guise as "a haven for rest" where visitors can sit on carefully chosen furniture and discover how stone sculpture can work in a domestic setting.

And a jam-packed programme of events includes talks, stone carving workshops, dusk and dawn birdsong walks, performing arts, The Potting Shed Café, and the Mad Hatter bookshop.

Nearly half of all the artists exhibiting this year are women, and nine are new to On Form, including Oxford artist Angela Palmer. We take a look at what she and two other Oxfordshire sculptors are showing.

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JORDI RAGA FRANCÉS

Valencia born Jordi Raga Francés says: “My first group exhibition in England was in Gloucester Cathedral. Rosie saw my work there and liked it. I was a stone mason working on the cathedral, making my own sculptures in my studio in my free time. Rosie visited my studio and then invited me to show at On Form.”

After studying sculpture in his home city, and Carrara, Italy, Jordi embarked on a career in heritage restoration, working across Europe, and coming to England to work with a master mason to learn more techniques.

Moving to Oxford a year ago, he took a studio in Longworth in order to get space.

“I need space to be able to think clearly about ideas. Quiet too - concepts come from inside the self,” he says.

My studio is in a barn, and I’m making larger pieces.”

His smaller sculptures like the cut-out leaves in past shows - this is his third time at On Form - are in the past, he says. “I can now make pieces of a good size. My direction, ideally, is larger scale, monumental pieces.”

One large work, *The Expulsion of Paradise*, is carved from pink Portuguese marble. “I like this marble,” he says. “It’s the first stone I ever worked, aged 19, at art school. I like its quality; more oily than say, Carrara marble.”

Expulsion, Jordi says, is “about taking something pure - a block, a cube previously squared, clean, symmetrical, as a symbol of purity, and then I cut it like an apple bitten into suggesting the contrast between the divine and the earthly.”

“In my work I’m really attracted to nature. I can see the beauty of ageing processes and physical actions such as pulling or fracturing. I work around the idea of observing nature and life cycles, and finding beauty in the whole picture.”

On Form 16 will be at Asthall Manor, Oxfordshire, from June 12 to July 10; noon to 6pm, closed Mondays and Tuesdays, open until 9pm on Thursdays; admission £10 to include catalogue, over 60s £7.50, students and 12 to 16 years £5, under 12s free. All works are for sale. See onformsculpture.co.uk for more details.

