

A New Park Sculpture at Compton Verney

Ariel Schlesinger (b. 1980, Israel) reveals the poetry, poignancy and potential in everyday things. Through precise interventions, engineering flair and trompe l'oeil, Schlesinger's work challenges our perceptions and encourages us to look at the familiar in new ways.

Schlesinger has lived and worked across the world, from California to Mexico and Berlin. *Ways To Say Goodbye* is his first commission in the UK.

Associate Curator Tamsin Dillon explores the development of the sculpture:

TD: What was your first reaction to the landscape at Compton Verney?

AS: It's a beautiful landscape. It felt so naturally formed, well-balanced and organic. It was a surprise to discover how much work and alteration had been put into making the park look untouched.

TD: Did you know about its designer, Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, before you were invited to make a proposal for the grounds?

AS: I didn't know about Mr Brown before my first visit here. After researching his work, I felt very close to the engineering inventions aspects, the mechanical apparatus he made like the tree mover that relocated large grown trees. I relate to the process of first creating the tools to make something, it's an important part of how I build things.

TD: How did you start thinking about what you could do here? Did you base your work on the history of the building or the park, or is it more of a spontaneous response to the landscape?

AS: I felt immediately that I wanted to make something that would blend into the park in the shape of a living organism, so that at first glance it might even look part of the living surroundings. The second view might reveal a different story, maybe even a tragic one. Later, playing at my studio, the idea formed. My right hand turned into a tree and a shattered glass got caught between my fingers which took the shape of branches.



TD: Have you ever made a work for a similar situation, outside or just not in a gallery?

AS: This is my first public sculpture situated in a growing environment. It feels like an interesting challenge since it's such a dynamic place, nothing is standing still and everything is constantly changing.

TD: So was it a big challenge for you to consider how to make a work that would be able to withstand this environment physically?

AS: Well, there are so many aspects in a public open air project like this one. Since the work is exposed to the elements and can be viewed all year round, one has to really make adjustments. The materials you can use and the engineering limitations really affect the final shape and feel of the sculpture. I saw it as a good challenge, and I chose to work with cast aluminium. This was a way to balance two worlds - even though the work itself weighs almost one tonne and is safe for public display, I like that it still feels very fragile and delicate, as if it could be broken or damaged easily.

TD: I was thinking about how you often take a man-made object as a starting point, but here you have used a natural object, and cast a tree from real specimens. Why did you choose a tree in particular, are there other ways that this motif of the tree is important for you?

AS: As a motif, the tree has been central in my recent work. An archetypal sculpture of infinite variety, it has become a standard form of depicting the interconnectedness of species. Trees are also the source of raw building material for us as well as a way to harvest energy when used as combustible firewood. This paradoxical human use of trees is interesting, building and at the same time destroying.

TD: Can you say something about why you decided to title the work *Ways To Say Goodbye*?

AS: I am fascinated by how one thing can be seen in different ways. The title is not a literal explanation but a sentence that I like, and I hope that it is more open to questions than answers.

TD: The word for hello and goodbye can be the same in some languages, is it that duality that you are referring to?

AS: The duality is definitely there, so I do think it's somehow connected to language. I would rather say it's about, for example, living in a different country but not learning its native language. It might be about being ungifted with languages but as importantly it might be about wanting to stay a foreigner, to the good and the bad in that. And maybe that's the paradox here, as much as this tree resembles its surroundings, it is also clearly an outsider, and that's fine.