

## **“HANGING ROCK”**

**Hilary Rose meets a sculptor who has carved out a dream career in his Devon studio**

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Those in search of a rural idyll with which to swap the pollutants and stresses of urban life could do worse than look to William Peers for inspiration. It helps that Peers earns his living as a sculptor, not an analyst at Morgan Stanley, and thus finds relocation rather easier, but still: he's constructing an existence that some people only dream about.

The house in Devon into which Peers and his wife, Sophie, moved into four years ago is what you could politely call a DIY enthusiast's dream. The outbuilding where he works is not everyone's idea of an office, lacking as it does any windows and having only recently gained a door, but for a sculptor who doesn't feel the cold it's probably well-nigh perfect.

So while Sophie works part-time on a local environmental magazine, Peers toils in his studio, turning out sculptures, some of which last week graced a garden at the Chelsea Flower Show. Only the occasional appearance of his two-year-old son, Sacha, makes him down tools – toddlers and iron picks not being a happy combination.

Peers became a professional sculptor almost by accident: having studied it in Falmouth in his twenties, he spent years making ceramics and doing odd painting and decorating jobs, before finally moving to Oxford. There, he met an old sculptor who'd had an accident and needed an apprentice to help out.

“He took me on and made me work very hard,” Peers recalls, “but it was a bit eccentric because he never really paid me. He gave marmalade or chutney instead, which isn't quite what you want, but I learnt a hell of a lot from him and I'm eternally grateful for his help.”

Having a sculpture accepted for the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition was a turning point, when he realised that sculpting could be not just a hobby but a feasible way to earn a living. Six months in a disused marble quarry in Carrara in Italy sealed the deal: “People were working harder than anyone I knew, creating, carving, doing their thing, and that made me take it seriously in a way I hadn't really seen in England. And it made me look at Michelangelo's work in a whole new light: I'd spend all day making a tiny difference to a tiny bit of marble, and you see the size of things he did ...”

His work now is based around his interest in the patterns found in nature. He used to carve figures in relief, but found himself drawn not to the figure he was tracing, but the landscape behind. “What interests me is the way that plants grow and move, and their structure; it fascinates me how the fur on animals swirls and eddies in the same way as water round a rock. People see all sorts of things in my work, even a spirituality,” he adds, “and in a time when we're so over-stimulated – there's so much information, and so much to read and to look at – it's good to have something calm.”

Carved almost entirely by hand out of solid blocks of Hornton stone, Peers's sculptures are unusual in that they are designed not be freestanding or in the garden, but to hang inside on walls. This happened because originally he treated his relief carvings, mainly of animals, as pictures which he framed to hang on the wall. Eventually he grew tired of both the frames and the animals, but the wall-hanging remained.

Peers has even created a hanging system of interlocking pieces of plywood which means walls don't have to be super-strong, and uses machines only to thin the slabs down to a manageable thickness. Once that's been achieved, he paints a rough idea of the pattern directly on to the surface of the stone. With no preparatory drawing, the work simply evolves from that, and he only discovers something doesn't work when he's carved it. At the moment, many of his works are examples of his 'doughballs' phase: having done carvings where the design spirals down to a hole in the stone, he experimented with carving something solid there instead, and so the doughballs came into being. (Although they look as if they've been stuck on they actually haven't – they've been carved out of the stone itself.)

Peers's work sells for £1,000 and upwards, and he produces about fifteen a year. Happy with almost any commercial outlet, including working to commission, the one arena he's not keen on is the internet. "It seems such a cold avenue to go down," he reasons. "I'm not interested in churning stuff out and flogging it; I'd much rather know where it's going."

Not that he's a hopeless romantic of the starving-in-garret/waiting for the muse to strike type. He is, he maintains, disciplined in his approach to work, believing that the idea of waiting for the muse is "a tried and tested disaster because you never do anything. The more you work, the more you feel like working; the more energised you become, the more ideas you have. In a beautiful spot like this you're in danger of disappearing into a romantic reverie, but I'm a practical guy – and I have to earn a living!"