

# SEA FARE

Rowan Mersh's delicate and intricate pieces use thousands of hand-cut shells. *Imogen Greenhalgh* meets the artist as he prepares for his London show to discover more about his painstaking process. Portrait overleaf by *Camilla Greenwell*







When I arrive to meet Rowan Mersh at his gallery, FUMI, the place is humming with activity. A collector has just announced they are going to drop in to look at a work, and preparations must be made. Boxes are busily unpacked, and the gallery's founders, Sam Pratt and Valerio Capo, dart from room to room, while a cleaner vacuums gingerly around installed pieces. Mersh, meanwhile, is quietly in the centre of it all, amid samples of his creations, making coffee. There have been, I gather, some rather late nights in the studio. Soon he is to mount an exhibition of his work at the gallery, and there's plenty still to do. 'These only arrived yesterday,' he tells me, picking up a sliver of conjoined, sliced shells that

looks almost like lace. 'Showing them to everyone here feels a bit like unwrapping presents before Christmas.'

Just as Christmases come to demarcate our lives, the exhibition in question already feels like a marker of sorts for Mersh. He has worked with FUMI for eight years now, but it's his first solo show in that time – and, it transpires, will also be FUMI's inaugural show at its new space in Mayfair, so an inevitable air of expectation hangs about the whole thing. 'We've been asking him for quite a few years and he always said "I can't do it, I need a year off in order to be able to do a proper show",' explains Pratt. 'This is the problem with Rowan: his work sells so well, we never

have anything in stock, and he's always busy with commissions so he can't really make anything for display purposes. So about a year ago we put him in a corner and said: let's do it next year.'

To those familiar with Mersh's work, and have gaped at the sheer painstakingness of it, such a lengthy germination period might seem unsurprising. He is, Pratt tells me, 'easily the hardest working maker we work with', and, by Mersh's own admission, a perfectionist. Until last year, this meant working alone, though he has recently hired his best friend, Nathan Pass, with whom he shares a background in textiles, having both trained at the RCA. His pieces frequently comprise thousands of hand-cut shells, some filed

## 'It's listening and guiding the shells, but not stopping anything from happening'

ROWAN MERSH

Previous page and above: *Asabikeshiinh (Dreamcatcher)*, 2016, sliced turritella shells, fluorocarbon, 204 x 288 cm. Right: Rowan Mersh with *Pithvava Praegressus*, 2017, dentalium shells







down to only a few millimetres in length, secured to one another with fishing line or set in resin-soaked foam and arranged to allow pristine, fractal-like patterns to play out at scale. The overall effect is similar to that of an exquisite tapestry: only up close can your perceptions adjust to register the minute differences of texture and tone. ‘Every single shell is slightly different, a slightly different thickness,’ he points out. ‘It’s something in nature that’s really cool.’

These natural idiosyncrasies have become part of the logic of his work, so the size and shape of each shell dictates the positioning of the next. He likens the process of laying out the shells to drawing, though perhaps there’s a little of the meditative jazz player too, unpicking the nuance of each note as he goes. This spontaneity

means there is never a sense of overwork. ‘It’s listening and guiding the shells, but not stopping anything from happening. You think you’ve got control [of the material] but it’s what *it* wants to do, so you allow it to build up how it wants to.’ Inevitably, bigger pieces take months to make – *Placuna Phoenix*, which consists of 40,000 individually placed windowpane oyster (or placuna) shells, took him five months to complete.

The end result, resembling the plumage of a rare bird, was unveiled at Design Miami/Basel in 2014 and made him a star. But he’s not one to rest on his laurels: with every new commission he specifies that something must be distinct from the last. It’s a rewarding place to be as a maker, but it puts him in a bind for this show: ‘It’s a big space. I’m a bit worried.’

When Mersh started out, big spaces didn’t bother him; in fact, quite the opposite. After graduating, he went in search of warehouses and legal squats: ‘It was the only way I could make work that was very large... I think you have that period when you’re younger, everything has to be bigger and better, and then you sort of settle.’ Through friends, he alighted on vacant knicker factories, disused bank depots and a former Chinese supermarket, in places like Hackney, Elephant and Castle and even off the King’s Road. These became his workshops and his home, their cavernous interiors the only match for his ambitions.

One of his most memorable projects from this period was *Invisible Boundaries*. Made in 2009, it paid tribute to a ‘very derelict’ building marked for demolition, in which he lived for over two years. ‘When I walked in, there were beautiful passages of light, so I chalked them out and taped the lines that formed to immortalise them,’ he explains. Over the course of several freezing January days, he wound 100 miles of silk thread through the building, transposing the shafts of light into iridescent threaded beams. Soon after, he cut each strand down, but created a film that shows the process in reverse, each fragile wisp tautening one by one. In a city still reeling after financial collapse and on the cusp of a tidal wave of redevelopment, Mersh’s hand-made tribute to his home seems particularly freighted, affirmative, even. Here is a city that might fix itself through its youth and its creativity, were we to give it the chance.

It was around this time that Mersh’s friend and sometime collaborator Sarah van Gameren, one half of the up-and-coming design studio Glithero with Tim Simpson, introduced him to Pratt and Capo, who had founded FUMI in 2008. Mersh had been ‘plugging a few gaping holes’ financially by selling collections of textile jewellery, and the gallerists asked if he might like to make some bespoke, one-off pieces for them. Then, when Mersh retired the jewellery side of things altogether, they invited him to contribute to a show they doing with Fendi. Mersh was handed a bag of the fashion house’s leather off-cuts and told to improvise. ‘As much as it was his talent, it was him as a person too,’ recalls Pratt. ‘It was instinct, really.’

The leather installation proved, in Mersh’s words, ‘pivotal’, not least because it secured him further high-profile commissions, and cemented

his relationship with the gallery. The wall-based installations were, he explains, steadily becoming a niche in which he felt comfortable, and rather serendipitously he discovered shells relatively soon after through a craft material supplier in America, a descendant of the native Yurok Tribe in California. She caught his imagination by explaining the folklore behind the dainty, fang-like dentalium shells. ‘She told me how they were given to the tribe by a deity who lived in the sea called Pithvava,’ Mersh recounts. ‘They were a form of sacred wealth... I found that really interesting.’

This fascination with shells, and the meticulous techniques they demanded of him, set Mersh off on a course he’s still traversing today, some five years later. While nearly all the shell-based work he has made to date has been sold – meaning visitors will see new pieces at the exhibition – a magnificent arrangement of windowpane oyster shells entitled *Placuna Pro Dilectione Mea* is one exception. ‘Its name means “for my love”. It was made for a person I was missing over the summer,’ he explains, a little bashfully. ‘It’s like a diary of the separation: some of the shells have been engraved, there are hidden messages. I think it’s the most personal and expressive work I’ve made, each bit I can relate to what happened on that day.’

Ideas about time, and the threads of personal attachment, surface elsewhere in the show, including through some new collaborations with old allies. Having remained friends and supporters of one another’s work, he and Glithero have a project in the pipeline that will combine aspects of the practices for which they are both known, namely the design studio’s blueware photographic technique and Mersh’s shell sculptures. ‘We’ll use the sculpture as a kind of negative... It’s come very much from the idea of trying to immortalise the shadows the shells make. They’re one of the things I really like about these pieces,’ Mersh explains. ‘There are a hundred things we could do with it, so we’ve just got to nail down exactly what.’

He is also teaming up with another of FUMI’s designers, Bob Lorimer, an old friend who helped Mersh make machines for installations in the past: ‘He’s got crazy skills in 3D modelling, all self-taught.’ Together, they intend to build on and refine Mersh’s forays into freestanding sculpture using a foam they have found that they can CNC. ‘Bob can model any complicated



shape, meaning we can make sculptures that are 10 metres high, no problem at all,’ Mersh enthuses, showing me some CAD drawings that reflect on the natural curvature of the shells. ‘We’re going to make something approximately 1.8 metres high for the exhibition, a proper sculpture. But it feels very much like the start of something, too, both in the complexity, shape and size, and in terms of the material itself.’

As he reels off more ideas about possibly casting parts of the sculptures in bronze, and some intriguing experiments he’s been doing with electroplating, I’m suddenly conscious the industrious Mersh is probably itching to get back to work. Before we finish up, he returns to his title for the exhibition, *Praeteritum, Praesens et Futurum*. We’re back to making sense of time,

the spiral of the mollusc’s shell. ‘I do feel with these collaborations in the show, I’m already getting onto the next whole series of work before even making anything,’ he reflects. ‘It’s why I wanted the show to be called [that], because it feels like it will be a full representation of my past, where I’m at now, and where I hope to go.’ An apotheosis of sorts, then? ‘I don’t know how it will all turn out. I’ve no idea what the response will be like,’ he deflects with a smile, as if struck afresh by the magnitude of such an undertaking. ‘It’s crossed-fingers time now. Just need a bit of luck and a lot of coffee.’ *‘Praeteritum, Praesens et Futurum’ is at Gallery FUMI’s new space in Hay Hill, Mayfair, London W1J 6AS, 19 May – 30 June. galleryfumi.com. www.rowanmersh.com*

Above: *Placuna Praegressus*, 2016, placuna shells, 65 x 68 cm.  
Above, right: *Speculo Spiralem*, 2015, mirrored polyester MDF, diameter 65 cm

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Above: *Placuna Pro Dilectione Mea*, 2016, placuna shells, diameter 125 cm.  
 Right: *Turritella Duplicata II*, 2015, turritella shells, diameter 12 cm



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