The new bronze age

A talking point that can inspire passions and transform a landscape, large-scale sculpture is increasingly valued by modern collectors. **Anna Tyzack** meets the artists bringing grand visions to life

Photographs by Joe Bailey and Mark Williamson

WITH its swirling horns and omniscient gaze, David Williams-Ellis's 26ft bronze ram will be seen from several fields away. The sculpture, which he created for a collector during lockdown and is now waiting to be cast, is one of many larger-than-life bronze pieces being installed in private gardens and public collections. 'There has never been a better time to be a sculptor or a foundry,' maintains Alexander Lumsden, an art historian for Bronze Age London, a foundry that has cast works by Antony Gormley. 'People are realising the value that sculpture can bring: it's a talking point; it engages people; it activates space.'

Helaine Blumenfeld, who shared a show with Henry Moore back in the 1980s and whose 16ft bronze *Metamorphosis* is now in situ at Canary Wharf, London E14, agrees that Britain is in the throes of a bronze renaissance, precipitated by the pandemic. During lockdown, she received emails from members of the public telling her that her sculpture spoke to them. 'Never in my 50-year career have I got so much response; sculpture gives us access to our emotions in a way no other art form does,' says Mrs Blumenfeld.

> 'Bronze resonates: it makes you feel something, it handles being outdoors and you only have to touch it to feel how precious it is'

Mr Lumsden has noted a resurgence in figurative bronzes produced in the age-old lost-wax method, where a metal duplicate of the original clay (or plaster) is cast from a mould created using a wax model, which melts away before casting. He's also seeing more works created digitally using three-dimensional printing processes. 'At foundries, you get to witness the sculptural zeitgeist first hand,' he explains. 'For a new generation of collectors, bronze resonates: it makes you feel something, it handles being outdoors and you only have to touch it to feel how precious it is.'

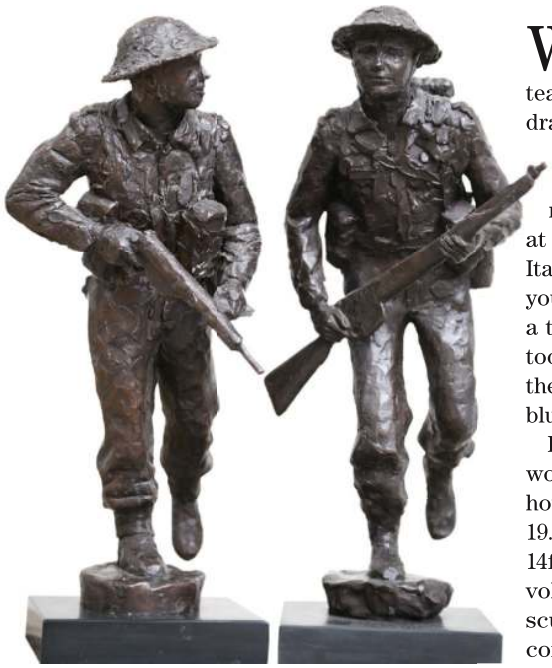
It can be a fraught operation getting a bronze sculpture in place in the landscape. Abby Hignell, director of Hignell Gallery, a specialist sculpture gallery in Mayfair, has set monumental bronzes on clifftops and in →

A ram to remember: David Williams-Ellis with one of his huge sculptures, a private commission for an Oxfordshire estate

Above: **Poised: *Squall* by Mr Williams-Ellis.** *Below:* **Maquettes for his 10 bronze soldiers in northern France, made to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the D-Day landings**

sunken courtyards. 'I installed one at a watermill, which required a temporary bridge to carry not only two tons of bronze, but also the cranes needed to erect it,' she remembers. 'The result is spectacular: sculpture is such a fantastic way to engage with an open-air space and it changes each day through the seasons.'

Foundries are busier than ever, despite the fact that production costs are rising; the casting process alone for a life-size portrait head costs about £1,500. It will be a while, however, before Britain's appetite for bronze catches up with that of Ancient Rome: Pliny the Younger, writing in about AD100, confirmed that Delphi, Athens and Corinth each contained more than 3,000 monumental bronzes—the UK today has only 800. 'It's taken a long time for people to once again see that it can be restorative and regenerative,' Mrs Blumenfeld believes. 'There's something magical about the fact that ancient bronzes have been found in perfect condition at the bottom of the sea.'



'Sculpture should inspire passion without being a gimmick'

WHEN David Williams-Ellis was a pupil at Stowe in Buckinghamshire, his art teacher noticed a sculptural quality to his drawings and encouraged him to start working in bronze. His first pieces, salt-cellar-sized portrait busts and torsos moulded from wax, sold when he was still at school and, afterwards, he studied in Italy. 'I love the visible strength of bronze—you can have a delicate figure standing on a tiptoe,' says Mr Williams-Ellis. 'Colour, too, is a big part of it for me; depending on the chemicals, you can bring in green, red, blue and black patinas.'

He was inspired to start producing larger works when staying with friends at a beach house on Vancouver Island, Canada, aged 19. 'At the end of the deck, they'd positioned 14ft tree trunks that brought into relief the volumes and depth of the landscape,' the sculptor recalls. His first larger-than-life commission was a series of figures for a Japanese collector. 'I realised that you have to be much more exacting when you're working on a larger scale—mistakes show more clearly and you have to get the form exactly right. It can't look weak.'

Since then, Mr Williams-Ellis has made several notable large-scale works, such as the memorial unveiled in northern France, in 2019, to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the D-Day landings. During lockdown, he started work on his largest to date: a 15ft by 26ft bronze ram's head for a collector's estate in Oxfordshire. 'I worked from a skull I found on eBay, then went to the site with a forklift truck and lifted an enormous piece of plyboard high into the air to work out the scale,' he says. 'If a sculpture is to be admired from a distance, it has to be large enough. It should inspire passion without being a gimmick.'

> 'Sculpture is such a fantastic way to engage with an open-air space and it changes each day'

As he waits for the piece to be cast in bronze, Mr Williams-Ellis has been making miniatures to adorn railings and gate posts around the estate, as well as finishing a new commission for the Fishmongers' Company. He usually knows instinctively what shape and scale will fit in the allocated space, but the subject matter is a collaboration with the client or organisation. 'I've been working from whole turbot and skate; the studio smells like a fish market,' he admits.
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'Only when the piece is finished do I understand what I was feeling'

IT was Helaine Blumenfeld's husband who first urged her to cast some of her sculptures in bronze, a few weeks before she gave birth to her first child. She was 20 at the time and studying under the sculptor Ossip Zadkine at art school in Paris. 'He wanted to assure me that I'd never stop being an artist when I was a mother,' she explains. 'We went to the foundry that Rodin used and, a few weeks later, we collected a group of polished bronzes.'

After her second child was born, Mrs Blumenfeld discovered the foundries around Pietrasanta in Italy and would spend two or three weeks there at a time. 'The foundry in France was closed to artists, but here I learnt Italian and how to cast in bronze and carve in marble,' she recalls. 'It's hard to be an

Henryk Hetflaisz; NUNZIO PRENNA/Canary Wharf Ltd

artist when you have children as you have to be totally immersed in both. When I came back, I was always a much better mother.'

Mrs Blumenfeld, who has created more than 90 large-scale works for public and private collections, maintains that she never thinks about anything as she sculpts. Her bronzes, some stark and reductive, others turbulent and emotional, are formed from her subconscious and explore the human spirit. 'I'm in a trance and only when the piece is finished do I understand what I was feeling when I made it.'

To help the onlooker explore their own subconscious, some of her pieces can be moved around, whereas others are installed on circular bases that pivot electronically, the light playing on the surface as it moves. 'They enrich the landscape and become part of it,' says the artist. 'I made a sculpture for a client's home on Lake Maggiore in Italy and, when they sold up, they reluctantly left it there—they felt it belonged in that space.'

She currently has six large works on show at Canary Wharf and is working digitally with the foundry Pangolin Editions, enlarging her monumental bronze *Metamorphosis* through three-dimensional printing. 'The traditional method using clay is not only more time consuming and costly, but offers less flexibility to make alterations,' feels Mrs Blumenfeld. 'I don't know how happy the foundry was with me changing things rather than letting the computer get on with it, but it's going to be a while before I can fully trust a robot.'
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Emotions made solid: Helaine Blumenfeld with *Illusion* at Canary Wharf, London E14

'It's a generational investment that will never fall apart or crack in the frost'

HAMISH MACKIE grew up on a farm in Cornwall, hunting, shooting, catching mackerel and barbecuing on the beach. His first bronze, a calf's head, which he made as a Christmas present for his father when he was only 12, still stands in the family kitchen. When he left Radley, he failed to get into the army and ended up at Falmouth School of Art, where he discovered a passion for sculpting wildlife. 'I was barely turning over four figures a year at the beginning; I had to warm up my Mini Metro with a hair dryer to get it to start,' he remembers.

Dogs and horses were Mr Mackie's bread and butter initially, sculpted in natural clay (the craggier the better) and cast in bronze using the lost-wax method. He made his own moulds, a laborious and not always successful undertaking, until his foundry suggested that perhaps they should do it for him.

The artist likes to get up close to his animal subject in the wild, be it bull, cheetah or octopus. 'This informs how I handle my material —in a loose, fluid manner or in a tighter, more controlled way; with large, sweeping strokes or with smaller details,' he explains. 'A sculpture should have its own power, then the viewer will feel an emotional response.'

His studio and garden in Hook Norton in Oxfordshire, where he lives with his wife, Laura, and three teenage daughters, Isabella, Matilda and Ottilie, is a menagerie of bronze lions, owls and roe buck positioned to cause a fleeting moment of suspense or surprise. His piece *Goodman's Fields Horses*, six life-and-a-quarter-size horses running loose through a pedestrianised plaza in the City of London, won a Public Monuments and Sculptures Association award and his bronze ammonite fossil is on loan to Horatio's Garden at the National Spinal Injuries Centre at Stoke Mandeville, Buckinghamshire.

'Quite often, I won't see a piece for six or eight months when it goes to be cast—it's always an exhilarating moment when it returns in bronze,' Mr Mackie says. 'It's expensive, but it's a generational investment that will never fall apart or crack in the frost.'
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Above: **Motionless amid the bustle: *Still Water* by Nic Fiddian-Green.** *Facing page:* **Aptly named: *Hares Monumental* by Hamish Mackie**

'Sculpture can kill a landscape or sing to its surroundings'

NIC FIDDIAN-GREEN was inspired to sculpt horses after seeing the Horse of Selene in the British Museum as a student. On leaving Chelsea College of Art in 1985, his first commission was a bronze of a local farmer's eventer—but he couldn't afford to cast it. 'When I found out what it would cost in bronze, I resolved to learn the lost-wax method and cast it myself,' he confesses.

Working in bronze was a revelation—he was fascinated by the surface and texture of clay and the metal enabled his marks to stand the test of time. Mr Fiddian-Green began experimenting with patina, mixing bronze with lead to create paler colours, and pouring the bronze to produce thinner forms: 'I always like to push the threshold of what's possible. The expertise of Chinese sculptors 3,000 years ago still astonishes me.'

His 33ft *Still Water* brings calmness to Park Lane in London; the 42in version of *Still Water* is in situ at a collector's home in South America; and the 12ft *Into the Wind* was commissioned by Ascot Racecourse to celebrate the 70th birthday of The Prince of Wales. 'Where you position a sculpture is critical—it can kill a landscape by dominating or it can sing to its surroundings,' he reflects.

Mr Fiddian-Green is now working on creating his own sculpture park at his home outside Guildford, Surrey, where he lives with his wife, Henrietta. 'It seems only right that my work should sit amid these oak avenues and open fields where I've been inspired and my children were born.'
www.nicfiddiangreen.art

'You can't move bronze around like Lego blocks'

WHEN Sophie Ryder graduated from the Royal Academy at the age of 20—she was the youngest student to be admitted since J. M. W. Turner in 1789, aged 14—the mythical creatures she made out of wire developed an instant following. 'My work was selling so fast that galleries pushed me to try bronze,' she explains. 'I wasn't interested to begin with—I considered it too commercial—but then I filled one of my wire pieces with plaster and cast it in bronze. I started to love working in this way; it makes more sense to be able to make an edition of nine, particularly given that some of my pieces take up to two years to make.'

Bronze, she adds, enables her to create large-scale pieces that can withstand both the vagaries of weather and crowds: 'There's always a lot of engineering going on inside—the pieces arrive in sections and get welded together on site,' she reveals.

When Miss Ryder's lurcher dropped a hare at her feet, he inspired the *Lady Hare*, an enormous hare with a female human body, a counterpart to Ancient Greek mythology's minotaur that has featured in many of her large works. Her 16ft *Dancing Hares* is in the garden of a private collector, whereas *Pink Lady Dancing with Big Brown Dog* is in Cirencester marketplace, Gloucestershire; another monumental piece, *The Minotaur* →

When the miniature becomes magnificent: Mr Mackie's *Wren*

***The Minotaur and Hare on the Bench*, the incarnation that sits at Wood Wharf, part of Canary Wharf, London E14, by Sophie Ryder**

and The Hare on Bench, has been on display at The Piece Hall in Halifax, West Yorkshire.

The sculptor works in plaster rather than clay, although it involves wearing a mask and her hands hurt from hammering. 'I love the look of it once it's finished: it can be pitted or smooth and you can add things to the surface,' enthuses Miss Ryder. She leaves her work in the studio for up to six months after finishing it, in case she needs to make finishing touches. 'It's a horrible feeling when you send it off to the foundry too soon, like sending an email without reading it through properly.'

> 'I'm in a trance and only when the piece is finished do I understand what I was feeling when I made it'

She's also meticulous about positioning her work in situ, travelling to the collector's home to ensure it is displayed correctly. 'It's got to look as if the piece was made for the space and this takes planning—you can't move bronze around like Lego blocks. It's a lovely feeling when you get it just right.' *www.sophieryder.com*

How to commission outdoor sculpture

- Find a sculptor whose work excites you and who you feel is excited by your commission. They will relish the opportunity to respond to location and create on a grand scale
- **If you don't have someone in mind, the Royal Society of Sculptors has a useful search tool on its website (www.sculptors.org.uk) or you could contact a specialist sculpture gallery, such as Hignell or Sladmore**
- Meet the sculptor. Some prefer you to liaise with their gallery initially; others welcome you to their studios by appointment. Take along any preliminary ideas or inspirations you have. Don't worry if you don't have specific subject matter in mind: consider the emotion you want your sculpture to inspire or the view you want it to frame
- **The artist (or gallery) will outline the creative process and discuss scale, patina and how the work will be placed on its base**
- Prices are based on the current market for their work and echo those achieved for related works, taking into account the foundry costs, which vary depending on the complexity and scale of the cast