

Visual Arts**Forever Young**

With their gravity and sense of deep time, Emily Young's sculptures contrast sharply with the Biennale's whirl



Emily Young, with two of her works

Rachel Spence MAY 24, 2013

It takes 15 minutes for Emily Young to drive me from Grosseto railway station to her home in the Tuscan hills. By the time we arrive, I have learnt more about the region from the British sculptor than if I had spent the morning in the library. From a gripping history of the alluvial plains to the damage inflicted by trawlermen on the local fish population, Young's passion for her environment shines as brightly as her startling turquoise eyes.

Although my mission is to discuss her forthcoming exhibition at the Venice Biennale, Young is already looking beyond. Along with other locally based sculptors, she is planning a "Parco dei Pesci" (Fish Park). "We are all going to make sculptures in stone to go on the seabed," she says. "That way the trawlers will have to steer clear."

Such zeal is in Young's DNA. One of six children, her father was Wayland Young, 2nd Baron Kennet, and a respected centre-left politician with strong environmental concerns; her mother Elizabeth, a writer and commentator, is in her nineties and still working. Her paternal grandmother Kathleen, previously married to the arctic explorer Captain Scott, was a successful sculptor who abandoned a modelling job with Rodin so that she could concentrate on her own art.

“In my family there was a lot of grand ambition generally,” says Young, swinging her black Saab to a halt in front of the enormous, honey-stoned 16th-century convent that has been her home for the past two years.

Young has inherited her family’s boldness and glamour. Still lovely at 61, thanks to cat-sharp features, those remarkable eyes and silky black hair, it’s not hard to see how the sight of her at 15, dancing in a London nightclub, inspired Pink Floyd singer Syd Barrett to write the song “See Emily Play”.

Yet a youth lived on the edge – “I was one of six. My parents worried but they couldn’t get too much on my case” – has not impeded her from becoming one of the leading sculptors of her generation. Feted for her gift for carving heads and torsos, and occasionally more abstract shapes such as discs, directly out of stone, she bubbles with the friendly self-confidence of one who knows that she is at the top of her game yet also displays the nervy, never-quite-satisfied energy common to serious artists. Her Venice show “doesn’t feel that important ...It’s just another lovely show.”

It is hard to imagine a more beguiling contrast to the biennial bacchanal than her exhibition in the cloisters of Madonna dell’Orto, a 15th-century church in the out-of-the-way district of Cannaregio.

Such spiritual residencies are nothing new for the artist. Aside from her convent dwelling, which she plans to turn into an exhibition space, she has made work for Salisbury Cathedral, for the crypt of London’s St Pancras Church and to grace the building that fronts St Paul’s. “I am not a practising Christian but churches love [my pieces],” she observes, ushering me out on to a grassy patch screened by oak trees that she has turned into an outdoor studio.

As the hoot of a scops owl (“you find them in Delphi, where the oracle is”, murmurs the erudite Young) salutes the blood-red sunset, her sculptures leave you in no doubt as to why they look at home in sacred spaces. Raised on industrial concrete cubes, the stone heads on display here possess a grave, theological timbre that begs comparison with Michelangelo, Rodin and Henry Moore.

Yet Young’s figures are uniquely themselves. In part they owe their individuality to her passion for different types of stone. Dolomitic limestone, Persian lapis lazuli, Indian agate and a rich, toffee-hued onyx quarried from the nearby mountain of Sant’Antimo, are just some of the varieties responsible for turning these faces into chromatic symphonies whose intricate streaks, seams and crevasses were born many millennia ago.

Although each head is quite different, what they have in common, as Young puts it, is that they are “full of feeling, and thought and reflection”. This aura is intensified by their unfinished character. Young carves and polishes part of the block, conjuring nose, lips and eyes into a smooth profile on one side, then allowing the other to fall away into a flayed, raw, jagged flank of stone that is entirely nature’s work.

The rapport between art and nature is a cornerstone of her vision. “Puvis de Chavannes said the purpose of art is to reinforce the great lines of nature,” she says, quoting the French 19th-century neo-classical painter. “Isn’t that beautiful?”

Over a delicious dinner of bruschetta and roast pork served by her elder brother Thoby, Young reveals herself as ferociously bright and well-read. Having devoured *New Scientist* since childhood, she peppers her conversation with references to recent scientific discoveries and to the danger that our neglect of the environment poses to our survival. Yet Young’s art emerges out of her gift for meshing rational knowledge with a more metaphysical response to her surroundings.

Travelling in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India as a young woman, she was blown away by the “wild nature and unparalleled freedom of the landscape”. It was then that she saw statues of Buddha whose hieratic stillness breathes in her own figures.

At that time, Young was in search of alternative inspiration to London’s art scene. Having spent much of her childhood in Rome – “where there were sculptures of magnificence and paintings of complexity and ambition in every church” – Young had enrolled at Chelsea School of Art ill-prepared for the conceptual tyranny that prevailed.

“I said: ‘I want to paint like Botticelli.’ And they said: ‘Ha! Ha! Go to the library.’ I thought: ‘I can find books anywhere,’ and went travelling.”

Even before she left for Asia, Young was familiar with heterodoxy. Schooled in the cosmopolitan west London hothouse that was Holland Park Comprehensive in the 1960s, she describes herself as “wilful, ineducable”. An artistic child – “I was always drawing” – as a teenager she gravitated towards the underground music scene.

Of Syd Barrett’s extravagant compliment, she says insouciantly: “I wasn’t that interested in them; they were just the band. I was much more interested in the beat poets who used to come down.” Nevertheless she calls Barrett “a wild, natural talent of the forest”.

After her travels, Young settled down to work in London as a figurative painter. She fell in love with Simon Jeffes, founder of music collective Penguin Café Orchestra, set up home with him and had a son Arthur (also a musician). Jeffes, who died of a brain tumour in 1997, was “completely supportive” of her work, once pouring ink on a “posh, pale blue carpet” to reassure her that it didn’t matter if her paint dripped.

The move from painting to sculpture was “pure serendipity”. The arrival at home of chunks of marble salvaged from the demolition of the old Lloyd’s of London insurance building prompted Young to remember the presence of a stonemason’s kit “left by a friend”. She started to experiment and was instantly converted. “I really liked stone because of the resistance,” she says. “As a painter, I was very free and loose. What I liked about the stone was that when I drew [carved] I had to focus incredibly carefully. [It took] all my power and energy.”

Stone, with its “incredible time-scales”, acts for Young as a bridge between ancient and modern, land and human, art and nature. “The thing that heals me [is] a place of beauty within the stone. You can feel the quietness, the ancientness, the passing of time, the effects of nature washing over it; wind, rain, explosions, volcanoes, earthquakes.”

At a moment when Venice is under siege from the trivial and temporary, those cloisters will be a welcome retreat indeed.

‘We Are Stone’s Children’, Cloister of Madonna dell’Orto, Cannareggio, Venice, June 1-August 26, then The Fine Art Society, London, September 6 - 26 www.emilyyoung.com
www.faslondon.com

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