

When interviewing someone my aim is not only to draw out what excites them as an artist, but to give someone reading their story a greater insight behind the pieces they see. In many ways this is exactly what Alan Thornhill, one of Gloucestershire's unsung creative heroes has done and continues to do with clay. He looks, feels and instinctively responds and works with the material he has loved for 40 years until something emerges. As a result there is depth and life in his pieces, a sense of spirit within the matter that has subconsciously come from the creator. He then allows the onlooker to interpret the outcome and put into their own terms what they feel about it.

The Museum in the Park is currently hosting a retrospective show of Alan Thornhill's work. Beautifully curated by Bob Thornycroft and Carole Conde it is a well rounded exhibition revealing various aspects of his career, including landscapes in oils on board, some not seen by the public before and a collection of sculptural drawings in charcoal, amongst them a strong self portrait of the artist himself.

Alan whose association with Stroud goes back many decades, has generously donated five large sculptures to the Museum. Officially part of Stroud District (Cowle) Museum Collection, only one Punch and Judy, has been seen by local people before. It is hoped that Exit, Animaversion, Summoner and Together will eventually have a permanent home in the redesigned former kitchen garden as and when funds are raised to reopen it.

"I am a great believer in people looking in a silent space, circulating slowly round the piece and being able to evolve a relationship with what they are looking at. However it is difficult to persuade people to do this and allow themselves to get attuned to the work" explains Alan. He has also given Putney, his former home, nine large sculptures. These were permanently installed along Putney Embankment, in the Borough of Wandsworth, South London in 2008.

As well as having had 20 solo exhibitions in a variety of spaces both indoors and outdoors, some of his sculptures and portrait heads are in public collections. They include the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds, the National Portrait Gallery London and the Humanities Research Centre, Austin Texas. He has also had a very successful part-time teaching career over the years.

I am fortunate to enjoy a meaningful conversation with Alan just before the private view of his show and gain a greater understanding of what matters to this artist, who all his working life has eluded fame and recognition amongst his contemporaries. Instead in quiet determination, Alan has followed his own natural path, incorporating an instinctive improvisational approach, embracing spontaneity and the unexpected.

A few years ago his elder daughter Anna Thornhill, an artist, film-maker and project manager, produced and directed a moving 40-minute documentary film called Spirit in Mass which charts her father's unconventional journey into sculpture. The title is a fitting one. Alan admits that for him sculpture is primarily about mass, the imprint of which is deep in our awareness especially in the context of the human figure.

The youngest by 17 years in a family of four children Alan says he had no art in his life at boarding school or at home in rural west Sussex. Despite two periods at university, interrupted by four years of war service, Alan felt that the role of 'intellectual' was not for him. Instead he knew he had to work creatively with his hands. He discovered clay at Camberwell School of Art in the pottery and instantly recognised this medium as best suited to his temperament. Alan went on to Farnham School of Art and then set up Hawkley Pottery in the Toadsmoor Valley, Eastcombe, which he successfully ran for nine years. In the early 1960s he made a conscious decision to move away from making table- and ovenware to try out more experimental works. "I became discontented with the repetition involved in potting and wanted to use clay for its own sake. It was a much more radical process using clay to build, a process I found very exciting," he recalls. Looking at a block of wet clay is like staring at a blank canvas. It takes courage to make that first move, without a sketch or prototype to work from; but once it is made the process can begin. Alan has discovered over the decades that the excitement and anticipation inspires him time and time again. "Working this way is a plunge into the unknown but it is really exciting once you have had the experience of it being fruitful."

Those plunges have resulted in a tremendous body of work. Ongoing themes of relationship, interaction, communication and the tragedy of communal violence and war are powerfully conveyed.

"If I am to have a legacy," he says, "it would be to infuse people with the confidence to turn inwards and develop their own rich resources of which they tend to be unaware, which places a limit on their satisfactions and creates a dependency on distraction which takes them out of the 'here and now'".

Stroud is in a very privileged position to have five of Alan's timeless sculptures and to host such an impressive retrospective exhibition. This is a sculptor of unique artistic sensibility whose work can touch universally at the deepest of levels – if only the onlooker dares to take time, stop and really look.