

The Human Clay

The portrait of the musician and poet Stephen Duffy is displayed as it was his song lyrics which inspired the title for the exhibition. The lines originate from W.H Auden's poem 'Letter to Lord Byron': *To me Art's subject is the human clay/And landscape but a background to a torso/ All Cézanne's apples I would give away/For one small Goya or a Daumier.*

The Environment Series

Sculptor Jon Edgar's Environment Series of clay heads marks some of those who have contributed to a potential better future, and include the writer Richard Mabey, scientist James Lovelock, Eden Project's Tim Smit and Riverford Organic's Guy Watson. Sitters are invited to participate in a barter of time. The breadth of this sculptor's archive of heads has permitted a bespoke selection for the University of Surrey exhibition; the distinguished climate scientist Professor Chris Rapley was formerly Director of the Science Museum and British Antarctic Survey and lives locally. Shalford-based automotive and ex-Formula 1 designer Gordon Murray was chosen for his developing contribution to small car design. The heads exhibited here offer insights into the characters of these creative and motivated personalities.

Winklestone from the Surrey borders

In the early 1800s, Winklestone rivalled many of the stones which were routinely imported from the continent. A kind of shell marble occurring in the Wealden clay just south of Blackdown, its quarrying was concentrated on the Egremont Estate. It was used in Westminster Abbey in Edward the Confessor's Chapel and the tomb of Edward III and of Richard II and his Queen. The Archbishop's Chair in Canterbury Cathedral is an entire piece of the stone. These facts are now little known, but were interesting to a sculptor exploring interesting stones to carve in an area which did not have a geology yielding an obvious carving freestone. Back in 2008, enquiries were made through for a source of the freshwater marble which developed in shallow lakes in relatively thin layers. Edgar was alerted to a seam of the rock that had been uncovered as part of new foundations at Sparrwood Farm at Plaistow; several works are now exhibited from this source just over the Surrey border.

New Works in Relief

The Slate carving *Charmer* is one of several new works which show the role of improvisation for this artist; the block started out with a random letter-cut on the horizontal slab, which was intended to act as a prompt for exploring what words/language might come. This proved to be merely a start, with the block pulling itself from the horizontal to the vertical and with strongly figurative imagery by the time carving ceased. The sculptor is not exactly sure of the derivation of the new reliefs, which include the 2 metre long carving in lime, *Blowing in the Wind* which started as a single vertical figure. *Faunal* is displayed in relief but is carved on both front and back and can sit happily on any of its edges, as can the granite *Igneous*. One possible influence or inspiration for the dominance of the relief form in recent works has been the presence of a sculptural frieze on a fragment of stone column (below), discovered by the artist and presently being written up for *Britannia*, the Journal of Roman Studies. The sculpture is now considered to be circa 1st century AD and an important new find for the nation. Whether its qualities have subconsciously influenced the decision to select blocks which have previously been passed by can only be surmised.



Carving blocks with provenance

Interesting histories seem to help Edgar's carvings develop and some pieces link to particular locations or people. A newspaper article in Spring 2008 described how disease forced the felling of a Cedar tree next to HRH The Prince of Wales' home at Highgrove. Edgar put pen to paper, wondering whether His Royal Highness had retained any of the tree after its sad loss. A reply was received with the gracious offer of one of the blocks. At Highgrove, several sections of the cedar were selected and in 2009, two blocks were worked which are now on loan to the Cotswold Care Hospice of which HRH is Patron. The third block, *Tipping Point*, was finished 5 days before this exhibition started - the smell of the cedarwood will still remain.

The Compton Triptych

Edgar searched for local clay in the parish to work on a head of the former curator of the Watts Gallery, Richard Jefferies. Mary Watts initiated the Compton Pottery in 1890s utilising the seam of clay found at Limnerslease, the house next to her artist husband G.F. Watts' studio. Whilst this had long since been exhausted, it seemed an appropriate plan to use local materials for the head, and the sculptor chanced upon the Brickfields Pottery after traipsing along stream banks searching for suitable material. Meeting the potter Mary Wondrausch, the plan became more complicated. She kindly mentioned a bag of clay quarried from work on the foundations of her house... but Edgar left Compton feeling that it would be sacrilegious not to use the material for a sitting with the remarkable person he had just met.

This left an odd balance. Having used three elements in combination before, it seemed right to think of a third head for a Compton Triptych. After an appeal through the local press suggested a number of candidates both living and historic, Edgar thought it fairest to select solely on the strength of feeling in the parish, as all suggestions were equally heartfelt. This was an odd mechanism for a selection by a visual artist - the sculptor had thus not even seen the subject prior to starting the head - but this just made the project more interesting. The resulting work's three elements balance artist, historian and Jane Turner as one of the community lynchpins which bind this diverse parish together.

Jon Edgar adds: *'Nothing ever goes quite to plan. Despite the higher firing temperature of the third head, the colour of the clay seemed oddly different. Uncovering some fired clay samples whilst preparing for the exhibition, I then slowly scrutinised the clay store and found a bag with "MW" scrawled on it - denoting Wondrausch's initials. Which was odd - but I now realise that my presumed Compton "C" bag was actually the remainder from a head of sculptor Mat Chivers; clay dug from the ground in North Dartmoor. Perhaps a subconscious indication that communities are made more vibrant by a combination of the local and the foreign? I still have the final bag of Compton Clay...'*

Please see the separate listing for names of works; some are also for sale.

A short book on the sculptor is available, with a foreword by Sir Roy Strong.



Jon Edgar - The Human Clay: 14 Nov - 22 Dec 2011

University of Surrey's campus has a successful Public Art programme with 30 sculptures and busts around the buildings and grounds. The Lewis Elton Gallery now shows an exhibition by the Frink School artist Jon Edgar; he will also present the Surrey Sculpture Society Autumn lecture on 23rd November.

The Artist

Jon Edgar (b.1968) is a sculptor of The Frink School, a small independent sculpture academy whose focus on the human figure remained the first source of inspiration, as it has from the earliest times. He uses methods of improvisation to *quarry things inside himself*. His carved sculpture is not pre-conceived; forms emerge, partly from a pre-occupation with life and landscape, partly from vigorous observation of eminent sitters during intense portrait sessions. Edgar balances work in clay - portraits of sitters of whose independent stance he is appreciative of - with carving. The additive contrasts with the reductive, but work from sittings often seems to re-emerge through the carved stone and wood. Several portraits are in public collections.

The Carved Sculptures

The works here span a period from 2002 to 2011. Edgar's improvisational methods include not selecting blocks so much as them selecting him, so their material and proportions - which influences the final form - are incredibly variable. Carvings are initiated without prior thought; maquettes are seen by the artist as deadening to the creative process. He feels that mere *translation of intent* is akin to the experience of a chain-gang worker. When forms start to appear, the block is often turned to suppress these until richer, more ambiguous imagery emerges. The very process seems to open or divide the block further to enable a wider selection of forms for consideration.

A portrait to mark the exhibition - Patricia Grayburn MBE DL

Pat Grayburn has been involved with the arts in the county for nearly 30 years after moving to become Arts Administrator at University of Surrey in 1983. The artist made a direct request, and she kindly agreed to sit for the portrait unveiled here. During the sitting Edgar learnt that whilst working for London County Council, she had commissioned the *Blind Beggar and his Dog* sculpture for Bethnal Green - one of Elisabeth Frink's earliest commissions.