

Summer Show 2023

The Shape of Life

In the words of Edward Bulmer
Guest curator, Summer Show 2023

One thing unites every living being. Life.

For all beings this life has a beginning and it has an end, but that is all we have in common, the form and shape of what fills that life is infinitely various.

Artists constantly mine this rich seam, but every one of us considers its physical, spiritual or philosophical dimensions from time to time. It often seems to me though that artists, better than many, help us see or know what it is we are thinking.

What is life, why is life as it is? Is it long enough, short enough, full enough, rewarding enough – is it fair?

Answers to these questions can be found in this impressive body of work – the response to the theme I set for this year's Summer Show, hosted at the Royal Society of Sculptors' iconic and newly restored headquarters, Dora House.

Worlds collide here – sculpture, nature, curiosity, historic buildings, morality, design and form – but these are my worlds, in the sense that I spend my waking hours trying to make sense of them and their place in this life. I feel I am not alone here, but we all, of course, place different emphasis on these things. Some of us are barely making ends meet, some of us are incarcerated and some abused. The lucky ones are free of these cares and some don't care at all. I celebrate the freedom that art finds in exploring everything it is to be human, but more than that I implore all artists to dig as deep as they like given the threat of the extinction of all living species. We are suffocating nature in so many ways and are now metaphorically sawing through the branch we are sitting on.

Parliament has closed down our freedom to protest in public and so it is more important than ever that art takes it up. We must really ask ourselves how we alter the shape of life so that it begets further life rather than fuelling extinction. We are in the end game: the choice is ours.

Lead us cleverly, sculptors, lead us!

Dora House is as sculptural as it is architectural. What we see today was the remodelling of a plain Regency terraced house with a celebration of the applied arts that was deemed fit to announce the photographic studio of Elliot & Fry, photographers of the rich and famous. Its 'studio life' has endured since then, but since 1919, as the home of sculptors rather than photographers. It was designed by the Scotsman William Flockhart in 1885 and is now listed Grade II. I applaud its recent, careful conservation. It creates expectations of what lies within, while saluting and enhancing the streetscape. It is my silent prayer that the neighbouring forecourt of the fossil dinosaur Shell will all too soon be levelled to become a public sculpture park!

There has been a golden thread between our art and our dwellings since the Palaeolithic period – it is as old as paint! I see this thread as a narrative over the centuries and between objects and beings in the here and now. This dialogue in the physical and the metaphysical can be endlessly fascinating and shape shifting. Taking their starting point as

the familiar form of old furniture, **Isobel Church**, **Nicola Turner** and **Sally Hewett** invite us to consider anthropomorphic and geomorphic shapes as an inevitable continuum (whether we are sitting comfortably or not). The old stone of Dora House itself is used to project the passage of time by **Tere Chad** and **César Cornejo** who uses miniature bricks to represent the building blocks of natural form, while **Julia Vogl's** colour swatches take us to a place many of us have been, when renewing the decoration of our homes.

Our human lives are played out in these homes, our workplaces and the public and private realm, they are the fragments of being in **Clee Claire Lee** and **Dave King's** pieces, the revolving shape nature and life take on in the works by **Ned Prizeman** and **Emma Elliott**. The tools we fashion to make our limbs themselves do our work concern **Susan Cutts** and **Wen-Hsi Harman**, while **Jane Ackroyd** and **Mary Anstee-Parry** explore the human imprint left behind as we live out our lives.

There is much wrong with life, as society frames it, from generation to generation and we are rightly in a constant state of evolution to change for the better, in the face of forces that wish to resist that change. Uncomfortable as they can be, these questions fundamentally bring us to ourselves and what it means to be human. Hierarchy, gender identity, the male gaze, body image and the ageing process are all thoughtfully and provocatively explored here in works by **Nick Hornby**, **Paul Bonomini**, **Sally Hewett** and **Stephanie Douet**. **Paul Tecklenberg** challenges societal premise, while **David Aston** questions the primacy of life in an infinite universe.

The fulcrum of this exploration is shape itself. When we consider our physical appearance, we often bring belief systems, received opinions and learned experience that are part of us defining shape. We see shape, but we feel it as well. Hogarth wrote of the serpentine line of beauty; the cubists promoted the straight line. Organic line can be seen here through the eyes of **Laura Ellen Bacon**, **Merete Rasmussen** and the mind's eye of **Ben Joiner**, **Millie Laing-Tate**, **Jonathan Roson**, **Kate Langrish-Smith** and **Lisa Snook**, while **Amanda Benson** and **Eleni Maragaki** take straight lines to create organic form.

Our human lives are inextricably linked with the fauna, flora and function of our planet home, we are part of Gaia's self-balancing system. These connections come through in pieces by **Barbara Beyer**, **Cathy de Monchaux** and **Harvey Hood**. For me, **Juliette Losq** and **Marianne Broch** take us 'into the woods' while **Robert Worley**, **Simone Kennedy**, **Susan Williams** and **Terry Jones** seem to reach back through time to explore the essence of nature.

I get a sense of wonder in the shape of life around us from the works of **Andre Wallace**, **Michelangelo Arteaga**, **Saroj Patel**, **Richard Hudson** and **Anna Gillespie**. Pieces by **Colin Kerrigan**, **Susan Williams**, **Harriet Hellman** and **Jason Taylor** seem to hint at the infinite meaning of this life.

Naturally this sense of wonder can lead to a sense of outrage where life is neglected, disrespected, or treated cruelly and I feel these stirrings in the work of **Amy Douglas**, **Julie Light**, **Susan Francis**, **Emma Woffenden** and **Chris Dunseath**.

I especially applaud the direct confrontation in the work of **Linda Hubbard**, **Ronn Beattie**, **Christy Symington** and **Nicola Anthony**. Ultimately, I feel that we all have to see the times we live in not just as an opportunity to marvel at the shape of life but to come to the realisation that it is a mutually supportive web that we are complacently neglecting and that we do so at our peril. Art gives us a way to see this.

The Royal Society of Sculptors

We champion contemporary sculpture and the artists who create it. We are leading the conversation about sculpture today through exhibitions and events for all, welcoming everyone interested in exploring this art form and its many possibilities. An artist-led, membership organisation, the Society supports and connects sculptors throughout their careers.



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Edward Bulmer is a leading interior designer, architectural historian and co-founder of Edward Bulmer Natural Paint. He has recently received the House & Garden Responsible Design Award and is leading the charge to make the design industry more sustainable. His latest book *The Colourful Past: Edward Bulmer & The English Country House* explores his work in some of Britain's finest homes, including Althorp, Goodwood, Pitshill House, and Broughton Hall.

www.edwardbulmerpaint.co.uk



SCULPTORS.ORG.UK

Dora House, 108 Old Brompton Road,
South Kensington, London SW7 3RA
020 7373 8615 | info@sculptors.org.uk

