





Lucy Churchill's tactile stone sculptures are much in demand and, as Emma Higginbotham discovers, you're positively encouraged to have a stroke.

Please do TOUCH

Pictures by Keith Jones and Helena G. Anderson. Picture from the organ screen by kind permission of the Provost and Scholars of King's College, Cambridge.



It's very early on a bright, chilly morning and, in spite of my bleariness, I'm sure of two things.

Number one: This is the right place. I've come to interview the sculptor Lucy Churchill, and I'm standing in a front garden that's cluttered with lumps of uncarved rock – and a stone horse's head.

Number two: I'm going to like Lucy. Not least because she answers the door holding a hamster. It seems rude to ask why.

"This is Muffin," she says, handing the ball of fluff to me while she finishes brewing a pot of coffee. Then, with mugs in hand (and Muffin safely back in her run), she leads me to the bright studio at the back of her Cambridge home.

A stone carver by trade, Lucy's sculptures are breathtakingly beautiful. Smooth and tactile, the eclectic pieces – ranging from a serene Mary Magdalene to pair of giant cupped hands – seem to beg to be stroked.

And getting touchy-feely with them is very much in order, as many are memorials specially-commissioned to soothe saddened souls. In fact, a friendly-looking otter, commissioned in memory of a grandfather who was a fan of the species, was designed specifically so that his grandchildren could clamber on it.

"My sculptures are made to be touched and become part of daily life," explains Lucy. "I love the fact that stone is warm to the touch. That's why people like having sculptures in their garden to commemorate their loved one, because you can put your hand on it and it's warm.

"It helps the healing process, I think, that you can go and touch it and leave it there. And then, as you see the carving age, it helps you to come to terms with the passing of time."

carving a career

An artistic career was always on the cards for Lucy. As a child she'd while away her hours drawing and making Fimo figures: "They were like my friends!" she says. "I made hundreds of them, and put personalities into them."

Her dream was to become an illustrator, but instead she studied 3D design and ended up working in the admin department at the Crafts Council Gallery. It was here, thanks to a demonstration of stone carving, that her life was to take a very different course.

"The first thing I fell in love with was the sound of the chisels," she recalls. "I just became entranced by it, and I started typing in the rhythm of the mallets.

"Then one of the demonstrators gave me an

application form for the City & Guilds School of Art. I thought it was because she had seen my fascination, and so the next day I threw a sickie and went to the college and said 'Let me in!' It was only years later that I realised she gave it to me to file away. . ."

Incredibly, Lucy gave up her job and applied to study restoration carving before she'd so much as touched a lump of stone. "I'd never done it before, but I just knew," she shrugs. "It was very strange."

After graduating, Lucy spent years working on everything from Lord Rothschild's marble fireplaces to the faces of saints at Cambridge colleges. She's chipped away at Ely Cathedral, Windsor Castle and York Minster, and has been watched by thousands of *Time Team* viewers carving a heraldic boar.

But when her daughter Phoebe was born in 2000, Lucy could no longer commit to trade hours, and instead began carving headstones.

"I loved doing them," she says. "Most people don't commission art, but headstones are something that many people will commission, and it felt like a real privilege. I would get people to bring photographs and tell me everything, and then I would try to encapsulate what they were trying to say." »

»It was, she says, an emotional business: “A lot of headstone carvers drive round the corner and cry before they drive home! You do become very close to the client. But having said that, you do burn out.”

That’s why she loves what she does now: commissions not for headstones with text, but for very personal memorials. “People nowadays want sculptures they can have in their garden or in their house to remember the person by, rather than putting it in a cemetery. They love it, because it means they can just go out, day or night, and just touch it. It’s so meaningful.”

One particularly stunning piece is a pair of colossal cupped hands, big enough to curl up in. It came about when Lucy was asked to make a memorial for an exhibition, “but not to a specific person. So for me it was just ‘What would I want to commemorate someone I loved?’ And it was the sense that they were being held, that they weren’t alone.”

But although many of her sculptures are memorials, others are commissioned by individuals simply wanting “to express their ethos in a three-dimensional form,” says Lucy. “Or because they just like the look of my work and want a piece in their home!”

The 48-year-old works with many different types of stone, ranging from hard, gritty sandstone (“which gives you nappy rash around your nostrils”) to French Caen stone (“like carving firm cheese”). Her current project, a stately lion, is being hewn from particularly tricky lump of Ancaster, which has both hard and soft seams. “I didn’t want to do it in very even-coloured stone, otherwise it might look like it came from a garden centre,” she sighs. “It’s a challenge, but it isn’t going to defeat me. . .”

As she carves, Lucy listens to music (“I love early choral music, but if I’m tired I’ll listen to rave music”), and the whole process is, she says, very cathartic.

“You start off bashing large lumps of stone, and build up quite a sweat and get very dusty – you



really have to put a lot of effort into it. And then, as you go along, the rhythm of your hammering becomes much more gentle, and you make smaller and smaller chips of the stone. In the end you’re just producing dust, and by the time you get to that stage it feels like a real reconciliation.”

I have to ask: has she ever lopped off something by accident? “Yes, but not for a long time! I remember every one of my mistakes, and there aren’t many because it’s so awful to put it right.”

a tudor tale

Alongside Lucy’s passion for carving is a passion for Tudor history. When her daughter Katinka was born seven years ago, she stopped working for a while, “and I spent a lot of time in King’s College Chapel, because you can wander around to this lovely wafting music”.

As she explored, Lucy found herself increasingly entranced by the carved wooden organ screen that divides the chapel. Installed during Henry VIII’s marriage to Anne Boleyn, it is, she says, “just encrusted with detail. It’s full of significance, and little jokes and references”.

She was particularly drawn to a dismembered head strung up by its hair (pictured left), a figure traditionally thought to be an adulterous woman carved as a warning to Anne: “But to me this just didn’t sound right, because I knew Henry was going to great efforts to get her accepted.”

It was, of all things, a breastfeeding pit-stop that led to Lucy’s lightbulb moment. “Katinka was going ‘Waaah!’ so I went into the nearest café, CB1 on Mill Road, and I was sitting there, bored, plugged in, and the nearest book happened to be *Wolf Hall*.” Not usually a fiction fan, Lucy nevertheless picked up Hilary Mantel’s Tudor tome, “and I just got sucked in.

“Then I suddenly read this line about the head of Absalom strung up by his hair, screaming in agony, and it was like a penny-dropping moment

Absalom was King David’s son, and Henry identified with King David. And I just thought ‘Ooh, there’s something there. . .’”

Lucy has since written an academic paper about her findings, as well as an index of the organ screen: “It’s a real trainspotter’s guide, but if you’re into Tudor history, it’s like ‘Woah!’ You see so many people wandering around going ‘I know there’s an Anne Boleyn initial here. . .’ So this is for real Tudor Trekkies to take with them and find the specific pieces.”

Why is she so fascinated by the Tudors? Lucy laughs. “My husband says ‘Why do you like reading about nasty people doing nasty things to each other?’ And I say ‘As soon as I’m bored I’ll move on’. And I just haven’t

“It’s a bit like doing a Sudoku puzzle,” she adds. “There are fragments of knowledge that give you an insight and whole areas where there isn’t any information, so it’s trying to piece those fragments together to make a bigger picture. I just find it so exciting.”

And the carvings excite her too? “Yes! Yes they do. They’re very bold; they’re not afraid of saying what they want to say, and the forms are just lovely. Quite chunky, I suppose; they’re less beautiful than later work, but they’re lively because of it. It’s more about the message than the image, and that’s what interests me.”

In spite of her foray into academia, Lucy’s heart will always lie in sculpture – yet it’s only recently that she’s begun calling herself a sculptor rather than a stone carver. “I’ve loved doing the commissions; I get stimulated by the idea of expressing someone else’s thoughts, and I have three or four waiting,” she says. “But I do want to do my own work now.”

She recalls a conversation with a gallery owner in Uppingham: “He said my work had an astonishing softness and warmth to it, but he said he could tell that it wasn’t coming from me. God, he was such a lovely bloke. He said ‘You’ve learned your craft: now is the time you should get on with it.’”

So what will she create? “Well when he was talking to me, he had this three-foot penis next to

him, and I said ‘To be honest that’s not my thing’. I mean I’m sure I could do a good one, but that’s not what I want to express!”

Lucy pauses. “I suppose it would be figurative. And warm and loving, and making people feel that they’re not alone.” She laughs self-consciously. “Or something. And I’m not quite sure what form that will take.” But she will do it? “I will, I will,” she says, laughing again. “I will, I will, I will.”

Watch this space. . .

•For more information about Lucy’s work, or to download her index of the carved imagery on the organ screen at King’s College Chapel, visit lucychurchill.com.

