

Animal Magnetism: Joseph Paxton



As an interview scenario, this is a first: I am encircled by five dogs in various attitudes. One is in a state of unbridled repose, another stands to attention atop a table, while a third appears fixedly on the scent of something, a slight intimation of menace creeping into its demeanour and darkly clouding its face. Should I be worried? Well, the fact that I'm installed in an artist's studio is some consolation. As is the fact that these dogs are made from plaster, steel and straw.

Their creator is sculptor Joseph Paxton, a sandy-haired 27-year old with a winning aptness to laugh at himself, and an engaging manner. Talking about his work, he is reflective, and there's a sense that he is still arranging the way he thinks about the whys and wherefores of his creations, which extends to hares and stags but is primarily focused on dogs. "People are always amazed I don't have a dog, but I'm pretty busy looking after myself. Still, it would be nice to have a dog running around here."

Nice maybe, but potentially disastrous for his sculptural incarnations. After all, each piece takes roughly two months to make, and excitable wagging tails are no respecters of le belle arti. Paxton tells me that though prolific in his charcoal drawing, he rarely does any preliminary sketching when it comes to making a sculpture. "I start by welding together a fairly complex steel armature which tends to change as I am building it. Often the steel structure dictates to you as it emerges, it's rather like drawing in 3D. I also use chicken wire and straw and plaster over the top which I work mainly with my hands." A rubber mould is then made of the sculptures, which are later cast into bronze at the foundry. The whole process takes six to eight weeks.

As he says, he's busy. The protracted process certainly eats up a lot of time, and now various galleries are cottoning on to his ascending star; Cork Street's Medici Gallery is featuring his work in its summer show, as will Courcoux and Courcoux in Hampshire and perhaps, most thrillingly, his piece *Hang Dog* (left), has been shortlisted for the Threadneedle Prize, currently being hailed as a serious alternative to the much maligned Turner gong, the exhibition for which opens at the Mall Galleries in September. He also has a number of private clients - after this interview he's dashing off to Kent to deliver a cast of a spaniel to a collector, and a Paxton lurcher in bronze is a permanent fixture at John Torode's Smiths of Smithfield. So he's bucking the credit crunch gloom? "I don't know what the trend is really," he says thoughtfully. "It's good that younger artists are being given a platform because I think people are still making investments in art, but are not necessarily willing to pay huge money." So it's less of a risk? "No risk at all," he quips back, grinning.

Paxton is still unravelling the reason for his dog-centric art but it's almost certainly in part down to an idyllic childhood in rural Monmouthshire. His family lived on a farm ("though we weren't farmers - we just lived in the old farmhouse, but it felt like it was our own little spot") and he spent his childhood observing and building up a bank of information. And then there was Mulligan, his English Setter with an Irish name.

"We had Mulligan when I was a baby, and he was my best buddy. If I hurt myself and he was miles away on the other side of the house, he'd come running if I was crying. I think the dog thing is probably partly informed by being in London - sculpting dogs takes you back to the country a bit. I'm nostalgic - I don't live in the past but I do look back with fondness quite a lot. This is my little part of the countryside - playing with straw." His family is creative, and he was inspired hugely by an art teacher at school. "Maybe he saw the potential in the way that I made marks and used materials. He always wanted me to go bigger and do things that sound wacky like drawing with a stick. It all sounds terribly arty, but actually it was about getting you to make marks. It really helped me because my work is so much about movement and energy - crap words to use! It's like saying something is 'nice' - but basically my sculpture is taking something that is clearly not alive and trying to make you feel as much as possible that you are in the presence of something that is alive. So when you're using that stick and your hand slips and you get a slightly clunky line, that mark has ten times more energy. The way I put the plaster and straw on - that energy IS the piece."

Animal art, I venture, is tricky because it can so easily take on a cutesiness at one end of the spectrum and a stuffiness at the other; the latter could have been especially true of Paxton's work since he currently is working predominantly with the hound form, traditional subject of hunting scenes. Instead his art is profoundly raw, macabre, melancholic and haunting. The sculptures have a presence that - blindingly obvious as it may seem - is so very... animal.

"It's easy to sentimentalise," says Paxton. "That's why I try not to involve the human element. I've never really been interested in the whole hunting thing. I used to go out with my air rifle sometimes when I was younger and shoot the odd rabbit, but it was always after careful observation of its habits, knowing where it was going to be, and I liked that sense of it being a one-on-one thing. I spent a lot of time getting to know how wildlife lives. And then shooting it!" He adds sardonically. Before quickly adding: "But only ever to eat."

One thing that Paxton is clear on is that he never wants to be thought of as someone who'll immortalize a favourite pet. "To me hounds have this specific way they perform, they have a certain physical structure, but essentially my sculpture uses the form of a dog as its reference point. It's not a dog. It's a sculpture." Neither is he bothered about creating anatomically faithful reproductions of dogs. The point is that the stances are exaggerated and are moreover faithful to the subject's character. "It has to make sense within itself as a form, but you have to really know something well before you can abstract it back." And Paxton, it is fair to say, knows his dogs. With that he heads off to Kent, bronze spaniel in-tow. Later he tells me delightedly his client was thrilled. I'm sure - after all, buying a Joseph Paxton is hardly risky business.