

Nicola Axe follows in the footsteps of Barbara Hepworth and American sculptors Enid Yandell and Cleo Hartwig. In the late 1800s when Yandell decided to pursue this career it was frowned upon, being seen as man's work. Brute force, often blood, sweat and tears were the requirements for shaping this heavy and unforgiving material. Much more the domain of Michelangelo and Rodin.

Where the greats had to make do with hand tools, technology helps Nicola: "I'm now using power tools to hasten the process of roughing out the stone and more quickly getting to the form hidden within the block. However, the final process is still by hand with hammer, chisels, files and sandpapers. I often find I have more ideas than time to make them."

At the same time as demand for Nicola's work grew, her youngest child started school. "I came to realise it could be an ideal time to start my own business. It's been a slow process that's gradually building each year.

"I feel that my life as a sculptor has been built from a succession of small successes raising my profile step-by-step. I am delighted that I have sold quite a few sculptures to gallery owners and other artists, always a wonderful confirmation of my work. One of my greatest joys is seeing my sculptures beautifully placed in the homes and gardens of their new owners."

The type of stone, its hardness and size with determine how long it will take Nicola to produce a sculpture. "Each one is unique and while smaller pieces can take a few days the larger and more complicated work can take up to a few months.

"I like to be working on more than one piece at a time, often you need to be able to put it to one side and just observe the work with fresh eyes. The ideas can develop in the making and you need time to see where it's taking you."

Nicola finds inspiration in nature, making various shell forms in different sizes. This kind of work has a wide appeal, she says. "More recently I have been exploring the carving of serpentine, a dense waxy stone,

True to herself

TIM SAUNDERS hears from Nicola Axe how she did not plan on becoming an award-winning sculptress and that she cannot imagine life without stone carving



TOP: Nicola Axe at work roughing out a large piece of Portland stone

RIGHT: 'One of my greatest joys is seeing my sculptures beautifully placed in the homes and gardens of their new owners'

which comes in a variety of colours; ideal for making sea turtles, fish and Manta Rays."

At the core of Nicola's work is the figurative carving, which is often abstract and usually developed in her favoured Portland stone. "This beautiful white stone is one of the harder limestones and perfect for details and the crisp lines in my abstract heads, torsos and yoga Mudras.

"My figurative works are an expression of my interests in yoga, meditation and the spiritual aspects of life. I believe

art is an exploration of ourselves and I feel it is so important as an artist to develop work that is true to yourself and not just commercially driven. It's a wonderful feeling when people resonate with the piece and are moved by its meaning for being."

She has chosen to exhibit at The Sculpture Park in Surrey, and won a bursary for Devon Open Studio. She is a selected member of Creative Coverage and secretary of South West Sculptors' Association.

Nicola, who has always enjoyed



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Where it all began

Nicola, from Newton Abbot, won first prizes in the Southern Stones Carving Competition in 2019 and the Showborough House Affordable Art Fair in 2016. She first had a go at stonecarving in a Devon Adult Education course.

"It involved trying wood - which I most wanted to have a go at - clay and stone. It was the stone carving that really captivated me. I knew I'd found my medium. I felt hooked to the possibilities of this ancient natural material and immediately had a passion for it."

From then on Nicola, who has lived in Devon for 22 years, was compelled to practise her new skills most days. "Over the next few years I gained more experience making new work."

Enhancing the landscape

Nicola loves the meditative process of carving as much as the finished pieces. "It's heavy and challenging work but very fulfilling, you begin to notice the carving of stone holds many insights into life's patterns and processes."

Ten years on from that first introduction to stone carving she is now an established and well-known sculptor with collectors throughout Britain. If ever you are fortunate enough to see her work in an outside exhibition it craves attention enhancing the landscape; leaving it bereft when removed.

Growing confidence saw Nicola apply to Delamore Arts in 2013 where she has exhibited her work in the extensive grounds every year since then. "My success here encouraged me to take on more exhibitions and commissions," she says.

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art and making, originally moved to Devon as a mature student to study physics at Exeter University. "I gave up on this after the first year struggling with the maths and questioning the direction I had taken."

She did however stay in the county working for a well-

known textile design company, moving to the south of Devon, 13 years ago. "I just love it here, the rugged moors, the beaches and being surrounded by nature and the colour green, it's a very special place to live and work." ♦ devonartistnetwork.co.uk/artists/nicola-axe