

Alison

WEST SUSSEX DOWNS

Madeleine Bunting

It was one of March's bleak days when the land seemed exhausted by the chill. There was no relief in the old Sussex barn with its high-pitched tiled roof supported by crooked timbers where the artist Alison Crowther worked. The cold, I was to discover, was important. The studio was unheated and draughts whistled through the barn doors and windows. My fingers turned yellow, Alison was dressed in thick layers, but could only manage an hour or so of carving before she retreated to a small heated cubicle to thaw out with hot tea.

This cold was good weather for carving green oak, slowing the process of drying and cracking. The barn was dominated by the trunk of an oak tree swollen by a huge burr which had been roughly cut into a massive sphere, 1.8 metres in diameter. An equally large piece had just left the studio to be installed. These are bold monuments which speak powerfully of the material's astonishing capacities for endurance. The timber comes from trees which have survived centuries of disease, storms and the vagaries of English weather.

For all the solidity of the forms, the material has its own volatility. The tree's history of growth, moisture and how it fed and supported its own colossal weight is still reverberating in the timber, and as the wood slowly dries and splits, it shapes itself into fissures and cracks which can pucker the surfaces Crowther so carefully carves.

As soon as the sapwood has been stripped off, carving commenced before the heartwood dried out and grew brittle. Too much heat in the studio – a hot summer for example – could accelerate the process so

that Crowther could find herself in a relationship of friendly rivalry with the wood to shape the final piece. The cold of this bitter March gave Crowther her best chance.

This was a part of the intimacy of the relationship between this artist and her material; the way she has accumulated knowledge of the particular properties and characteristics of green oak. It is in this close working of the material that the magnificent oak trees of the English countryside were finally knowable to the hand and the eye. It's a knowledge which sits in a long tradition of wood working whose legacy is still evident in countless buildings and furniture across England. The oak tree in leaf has been a symbol of England, but even more importantly, its timber has been used to meet so many of our basic human needs – for shelter, for rest, for comfort and for convenience.

Crowther carves grooves across the surface, following the annual rings and the medullary rays, to cover these large forms with sensuous lines. When oiled multiple times with linseed, the rich tawny yellows, creams and pale oranges of the wood emerge and glow in the dusty barn. Crowther rolled back the protective blankets as if the finished pieces were sleeping. They were deeply seductive, begging to be felt with the stroke of a hand, the tracing of a finger along the grooves which patterned the silky surfaces. This was wood at its most loveable, rich with the history of its own struggle with the elements of earth, wind, air and water.

By way of explanation, she showed me how the annual rings can suddenly kink, marking a moment in the tree's history, or the rings swirl around where there was a branch. The challenge lies in how to acknowledge these and create the patterns which fully express the truth of the material.

The immense ball of the oak burr was fiendishly complex to carve; its surface was riven by deep crevices bulging with the boiling mass of wood nodules characteristic of burr. In some places, the wood has rotted and has to be dug out. Through these diseased sections, the grooves she planned to carve will swirl and unspool round the surface so that the vast mass of material will almost appear to spin.

Much of Crowther's material comes from the Sussex countryside

where she lives between Midhurst and Petersfield. Magnificent trees are still part of the hedgerows and copses which patch this farmland and its carefully manicured villages. Nearby estates such as Cowdray are a precious source of old timber which may have been blighted by disease or is too awkwardly shaped for commercial buyers. Crowther has built up relationships with specialist timber merchants across the country so that they turn to her when a particularly unusual piece of timber becomes available. The old hands in the trade, she said, can tell from a piece of oak the soil it grew in and read its origins to a particular part of the country, even to a specific estate. It's this kind of deep knowledge of oak, past and present, built up over a lifetime which is a powerful inspiration.

Crowther started in furniture design – in a great English centre of the craft in High Wycombe amongst the woods of the Chilterns – and the keen interest in the techniques and engineering with wood have persisted. But she moved away from the functional, and the pieces now serve as bold punctuation in a landscape. The metaphor is apt because her pieces are often not upright but like a full stop or a parenthesis, they relate to the lay of the land. They can sit or sometimes even squat: rounded forms like eggs, kidneys and soft-nosed torpedos. They have the modesty of comment rather than making an assertive statement as monuments are wont to do.

Their power often comes from the sense of inner force bulging beneath the patterned surface. Seeds are an inspiration for both their patterns and their forms; and some pieces are resonant of the dramatic curve of a full-term pregnancy. There is a generative force concealed in the work, and which the cracking expresses. Just as some seeds scatter through explosion, so these recumbent massive seeds hint at this natural history of reproduction and forceful expulsion.

David Nash and Peter Randall Page have been key influences, and the resonances are not hard to find in the forms, and the interest in charring which marks some of her smaller pieces. The burnt surface grid speaks simultaneously of pineapples and hand grenades: those echoes of fruitfulness and explosion.

The biggest influence has been the theory of the 'workmanship of

risk' of David Pye, the famous theorist. 'Workmanship ... in which the quality of the result is not predetermined but depends on the judgment, dexterity and care which the maker exercises as he works... and the quality of the result is continually at risk during the process of making.'

For all the hours and days of carving and oiling the pieces to fulfill her vision, there is always the risk of her work being disrupted by the wood as it responds itself to the elements: a heated indoor space, or the wind and rain of an outside installation. It can crack, split in unexpected ways, still working out the huge tensions which were stored in its growth.

It's this combination of monumental strength with delicate sensuality which has ensured that the work has found its way all over the world. The enormous round ball of oak burr on the studio floor is destined for Barcelona. Major pieces have been installed in the glass palaces of corporate headquarters from Hong Kong to Canary Wharf where they strike a dramatic contrast with the shine of steel, marble and glass. In the Shard, London's new skyscraper, a piece bulging with curves, serves to support a glass top as a table for diners. The gorgeous extravagance of these pieces is a far cry from Crowther's chilly barn.

The tractors of the working farm are parked up outside next to piles of timber offcuts and new massive trunks awaiting their metamorphosis. This Sussex farmyard is a place of hard labour; of precarious livings from the land. Yet the work produced here is now part of a global currency of style and status. Crowther acknowledges the multiple paradoxes that her work in an old tradition of English oak wood carving is appropriated by new centres of power for its associations of longevity and stability.

More important even than either of these great symbolic values, to my mind, is the intimacy of touch which these carved pieces both express and demand. A recent photographer caught a poignant image of Crowther's hand stroking a carving. Against the gleaming wood, her small fingers seem worn, a little grubby, the nails short. It's a comment on human vulnerability, and of how human lives are both shorter and so much more fragile in many ways than this oak timber. In the gleaming offices, Crowther's work is a quiet but powerful comment on such truths.