



MARJANNE MARJENS

DESIGN EYE

A discordant view?

The sculptor's voice has become increasingly dominant in some gardens, says **Tom Stuart-Smith**, making a plea for a more harmonious whole

Three years ago I commissioned some modest but rather beautiful oak posts from the sculptors Martin and Dowling. They are totemic, tapering spires gouged into a series of horizontal ridges, with the crests of the ridges charred black as if for some pagan ritual. They remind me of narwhal tusks, satisfyingly primitive, and I had this vision of them in the garden rising from amid a sea of grasses and echinaceas.

Over the years I planned to add to my initial starter pack of three posts so that part of the garden was devoted to this sculptural cluster. But I lost heart, unconvinced that I could live with them day after day, year after year, lording it over the periscarinas. Their presence coloured the whole experience of the garden, and instead of giving wing to the imagination they tended to make me feel constrained and even irritated when I came on them again and again.

So finally I admitted defeat and took two of them into the house and have one sitting in a very narrow gap in a hedge where it still looks good and gives me pleasure three years on. You come across it by surprise and it is a curious incident rather than a dominant theme.

When working on historic gardens I frequently introduce ornament and sculpture that is of the period and character of the place. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, classical myth was the universally accepted language of much creative endeavour, and many great gardens are populated by Apollo, Diana or Priapus. But today we lack this shared cultural reference and there is no common iconography that has replaced it. As a result, sculpture plays a more individualistic role in the garden - the sculptor's voice is increasingly loud and often competes with the designer's vision of the place.

Contemporary sculpture gardens seem to compound this problem. They may be fascinating collections of art, but they are unsatisfactory as gardens, because there are so many objects competing for attention. In a visit to Storm King in upstate New York several years ago I saw magnificent installations by Richard Serra, Andy Goldsworthy and Isamu Noguchi among others, but I longed for just one vision

of a place, not all those different ideas competing for attention.

Although not conceived as a sculpture garden, I think the Garden of Cosmic Speculation created in the Scottish borders by Charles Jencks and Maggie Keswick falls into the same trap. This a landscape brimming over with sculptural event and with a density of cosmological symbolism that makes me feel quite ignorant. Some of the images from this garden are spectacular. The central swirling earth and water composition achieves that rare combination of the sophisticated, the primitive and the beautiful. It is redolent of Studley Royal, the magnificent eighteenth century water garden in Yorkshire, of Mogul calligraphy

and strip lynchets, the narrow pre-medieval cultivation terraces you often see in the countryside. But in contrast to this rich and serene composition of the elements, much of the garden is packed with more complex installations exploring different aspects of cosmological theory. I am left wishing that it was all less instructive and settled for the one grandly expressed idea, sublime and eloquent in its simplicity.

For why cannot the whole garden be considered as a single sculpture without the necessity for these added objects that define and direct? The garden is then a medium through which we can articulate our relationship with the world beyond. In this respect a garden is no different from a novel, a painting or any work of art which enables a different perspective on the world.

Within it there can be areas that are mysterious or introspective, some that are simple and grand, perhaps parts that have an almost vertiginous relationship between the inside and the outside world, but more important than the effect of the individual parts is the coherence of the overall composition. Without this coherence and allegiance to one overriding idea, a garden can never be more than the sum of its parts. ■

Five times Chelsea gold medal winner Tom Stuart-Smith has designed gardens for RHS Rosemoor, Devon and for HM the Queen at Windsor. He lives in Hertfordshire with his wife and three children.



NTP/IGLASTONBURY TOR

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ABOVE Glastonbury Tor in Somerset shows clear evidence of centuries of cultivation in its curving strip lynchets - narrow terraces formed by the ploughing of land for crops. Garden designers have been inspired by landscape forms like these to create sophisticated garden features.

FACING PAGE PHOTOGRAPH BY CHARLES JENCKS



THE GARDEN OF COSMIC SPECULATION

This world famous garden was created by the architectural writer Charles Jencks with his late wife Maggie Keswick at the home of Maggie's parents in the Scottish Borders. It covers 30 acres and was conceived as a place to celebrate and explore fundamental aspects of the universe. **ABOVE** The Snake Mound is part of a series of sweeping landforms, demonstrating a basic concept of the garden - that a landscape of waves is one that more closely links us to nature. **BELOW FROM LEFT** The DNA sculpture; The Universe Cascade offers a way of looking at the history of the universe - the steps mirror the jumps and shifts in evolution. *Charles Jencks's book The Garden of Cosmic Speculation is published by Frances Lincoln, £35.*

