



Come on in, the lawn's lovely

A swimmer in the grass, glass tulips in the borders and a fibre-optic light show. A quiet rectory garden in the Cotswolds is the astonishing setting for this fresh take on modern sculpture. By Celestria Noel. Photographs by Andrew Hayes-Watkins

Landed Gentry', Tim Sandys-Renton's concrete swimmer with copper cap, emerges from the lawn. *Right*, 'Walking Ice', Richard Jackson's deeply etched glass fronds, is positioned in the long grass by the Coln. *Below right*, two of the nine glass pieces that make up 'Cortigiane e Guardiani', by Philip Baldwin and Monica Guggisberg



A rectory garden at the edge of a Cotswold village is not the most obvious venue for a major exhibition of contemporary sculpture, but the biennial Quenington Sculpture Show, mounted by the art historian Lucy Abel Smith and her industrialist husband, David, is becoming an established event. 'Fresh Air 2001' attracts well-known artists such as Lynn Chadwick, Wendy Ramshaw and Guy Taplin, as well as newer names – some local, but others from as far away as Zimbabwe – working in many media. This year, however, the focus will be on glass.

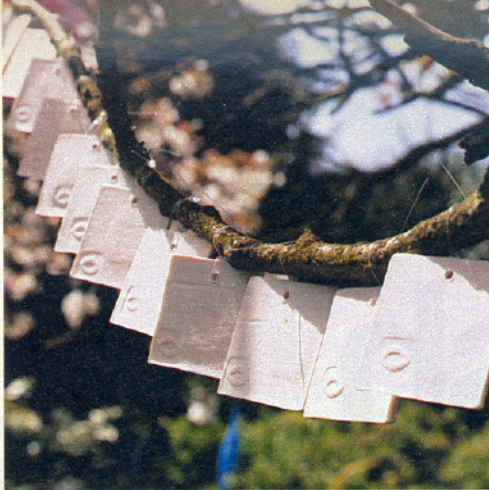
The Coln, which flows through the five-acre garden, and its mill-stream are very much part of the *mise en scène*. So, too, are the mature trees and buildings, such as the grandly named banqueting house at the end of the lawn where the smaller abstract pieces are shown. Larger works that need the perspective of distance are placed beyond the river, where the garden opens out. A fibre-optic light show will be mounted under a stone bridge, next to the old village mill-wheel.

Away from the more formal lawns, the woodland garden, with its winding walks and longer grass, is perfect for paths of mosaic and slate paving-stones, as well as glass or ceramic banners hanging from trees. There are artistic and horticultural surprises at every turn. The garden has distinct mood changes from the cultivated to the wild, and this is reflected in the way Lucy positions the works of art. 'Even with almost 100 objects in the garden, each piece must have its own space,' she says. 'It is one of the aspects of the show I like doing best. The idea is for the artists to be able to show and, we hope, sell their work in a relaxed atmosphere.'

Lucy has a hands-on attitude to organising the exhibition; apart from being an art expert, she is a knowledgeable gardener whose plot is run on organic lines. In fact, commitment characterises her approach to horticulture and art alike. 'Private patronage has been sidelined; many sculptors are asked to provide works only for public spaces or for corporations,' she says. 'We should all be commissioning work, but to do so people need to see what there is and gain confidence.' To help inspire others, the Abel Smiths have commissioned six glass designers to make their first ever outdoor pieces for the exhibition.

Both Lucy and David are fans of contemporary glass. David says that although modern technology means that most glass is well suited to being used outside and can be left in the open air without being damaged by frost, it is still underappreciated as a garden decoration; today's glass artists have a tough time – their materials are no cheaper than those of other sculptors working in, say, bronze. He was converted to the contemporary by Lucy, and he shares her conviction that people should have the confidence to step away from the traditions with which they have been brought up.

Lucy makes the point that there is no need to adopt an austere approach in order to collect contemporary works of art. The exhibition aims to show the many different ways glass can be used and the many forms it can take: clear, stained glass, opaque, coloured, etched. There will be tapestry-like banners by Sarianne Durie; a glass tree; bold seed heads; and tall, lollipop-coloured, stylised tulips thrusting through the borders. Abstracts include a simple clear-glass prism by Sally Fawkes, positioned to catch the evening light in a flower bed, and a glass path by Galia Amsel. There will even be the 6ft maquette of a resin and glass bridge, designed by Thomas Heatherwick and engineered by Tony Hunt, which, were you to commission it in full scale, would set you back more than £100,000, depending on the size. More to the pocket of private collectors at around £1,800 will be a deeply etched



glass frond, by Richard Jackson, shown lying in the long grass beside the river.

The event started 10 years ago when Brewery Arts, a multi-media arts centre in Cirencester, asked if the Abel Smiths would hold a sculpture show in their garden as part of a programme to bring art to rural areas. In 1997 they decided to take over its running

Clockwise from above, David and Lucy Abel Smith with 'Lith I' and 'Lith II', a pair of marble columns by Jonathan Leslie; 'Tree Rhythm Three', a series of 13 cream-coloured porcelain squares by Juliet Thorne, hangs from a flowering cherry tree; 'Running Fox', by Janie Beardsall; the Old Rectory, on the banks of the Coln

themselves. Since then it has expanded, but as the show costs more than £7,000 to stage they have established a charitable trust to ensure its future. The trust offers bursaries to artists – this year's recipients are Sarah Blood and Galia Amsel, who both work in glass – and there is also an educational aspect: 500 children from local schools are expected to visit the show. Among the keenest observers is the Abel Smiths' 10-year-old daughter Eliza – her parents believe in inculcating an appreciation of beautiful things from the start. 'We try to get the whole village involved, indeed the whole area, and we have volunteers selling catalogues,' says Lucy. 'All the work is for sale and we take a commission of 33 per cent, less than some London galleries.' Prices range from £300 to £15,000. About 3,500 people came last time and this year more are expected. They include serious collectors, first-time buyers and those who simply enjoy wandering round the gardens.

Apart from what has been brought in for the show, the garden contains the Abel Smiths' permanent collection. On a patch of mown lawn you come across the torso of a swimmer, emerging from the ground: a piece by Tim Sandys-Renton called *Landed Gentry*, which Lucy bought David for his birthday in 1998. 'We pick things up for fun wherever we go and never pay megabucks,' she says. 'By the same token the majority of the artists we ask to exhibit are not necessarily the biggest names. We just hope to set ideas spinning.' 'Fresh Air 2001' will be held in the gardens of Quenington Old Rectory, near Cirencester, Gloucestershire, from June 16 to July 7. Admission is free except on June 24, when the garden is open for charity as part of the National Gardens Scheme. For details, call 01285-750358