

Hampton Court Flower Show 2011: Alice in Wonderland in the Rose Marquee

The surreal quirkiness of 'Alice in Wonderland' has infiltrated the Rose Marquee at the Hampton Court Flower Show 2011



Tea time: the Mad Hatter is an unusual water feature

By Ambra Edwards
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First there was the Grecian urn. Then there was the rusty chicken. Now characters from children's classics are providing fertile ground for a quirky new style of garden sculpture.

This year, the Rose Marquee at Hampton Court has an Alice in Wonderland theme. I'm off to the Robert James workshop, home of Wonderland Bronze, whose extraordinary literary sculptures will be setting the tone for the exhibit.

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But it turns out Robert James does not exist. Rather, there's a Robert and a James – otherwise known as Bob Ellis and Jim Coplestone, as inseparable as Tweedledum and Tweedledee. The workshop turns out to be a small cottage in west Dorset, surrounded by vertiginous hills where sheep appear to be grazing in mid-air.

We squeeze into the conservatory for a cup of tea. It feels much like a Mad Hatter's tea party, sipping away as we are surrounded by clay maquettes for new figures, with runner ducks cantering in and out and whooping from the parrot next door. Piles of illustrated books sway dangerously on every surface. An unnervingly lifelike White Rabbit peeps out from a clump of ferns. "He's destined for a house in Surrey," explains Jim, "but we have to work out how to show him emerging from an aesthetically pleasing and low-maintenance rabbit hole."

Most people visiting Chelsea Flower Show go home with a few jottings in a notebook, or an over-large order for bulbs. But for Jim, the show was life-changing.

"It was five years ago that I first went to Chelsea and walked round looking at the sculpture. It was clear there was something missing – something child-based, something a bit dreamy, something to do with stories in gardens."

So Jim went home, handed in his notice as a primary schoolteacher and set to work to realise his vision of a kind of storytelling sculpture not previously seen in Britain – or at least not since the first fairy-tale gnomes appeared at Lamport Hall in 1847.

Jim also worked as an illustrator of children's books, and knew the power of illustration to fire the imagination. His idea was to take images familiar to generations of parents and children and render them into life-size 3D – a notion that derived from his own practice of modelling characters in clay before drawing them. His starting point would be the Tenniel illustrations for Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* – "unsettling images, quite anarchic, the antithesis of twee. It was absolutely crucial to be faithful to the drawings."

The next step was to learn to cast bronze. "I put myself on a course and fell in love with the process." But he realised he needed help.

Jim and Bob had worked together for many years in an environmental theatre group, exploring the links between imagination and landscape. Bob not only understood the territory but was an experienced sculptor.

The fruits of their collaboration were shown for the first time at Chelsea in May, and now have pride of place in the Lewis Carroll-themed Rose Marquee. A new character has been created especially for the show – a thigh-high playing-card figure who appears to be singing his heart out as he daubs the Red Queen's roses. He joins a beaming Cheshire cat, a scurrying White Rabbit and a deliciously wary-looking Alice. A frantic Mad Hatter "makes an unusual water feature", while a Dodo leans on his cane, like a kindly old schoolmaster.

"I'd like to do the Red Queen next", says Jim, while Bob rather fancies Carroll's lachrymose, mightily tusked Walrus.

But Alice is by no means the only string to their bow – they have also explored Peter Pan and Edward Lear’s *The Owl and the Pussy Cat*, and are eager to try tales from Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are*. “Sculpture can be a very egocentric activity,” muses Bob, “all about imposing a form on the landscape. That’s not at all what we’re trying to do. These are merely objects of suggestion, creating stories for people to come across in the landscape.”

“It’s about playing,” says Jim firmly. “As a child, you run round the garden making up stories. You can be underwater, or on the moon – your garden can be anywhere and anything you like. We want you to forget about the self-conscious effort of creating a garden and allow your imagination to explore it.”

Both men are troubled by the feeling that gardens have taken a wrong turn. “Our ambition is to reignite that childlike sense of wonder in the landscape,” says Bob.

“We want to bring enchantment to the garden.”

The Telegraph original article may be read [HERE](#)