

Beauty from base metal

Alan Tobias-Williams' powerful art ranges from strong textured paintings to large sculptures, made from mild steel and reclaimed items. The sculptures are centre stage at a new exhibition. Simon Irwin went to the artist's home in Worthing to find out more

Pictures by Kate Eastman

ART was in the blood for Alan Tobias-Williams. His mother Julia was a sculptor and their home in Manhattan was full of her work. When he was a child, Julia used to throw shards of stone to him to work on but every time he tried, it broke.

This might be why he ended up working with steel, a medium where you can weld elements together in a way you can't with stone.

He says the main thing he took from his childhood experience was a respect for the work that went into the creative process. And he decided he wanted to be a creator rather than a performer.

As he grew up he travelled widely in Europe and visited his uncle at Twickenham on a regular basis. At 18 or 19 he rode on a motorbike from North Africa to Barcelona and Paris and then went to stay with his uncle.

His formal art training was at the School of Visual Arts of New York University. But he says: "To be honest, I think I learnt a lot more from my mother."

After spending six or seven years in Spain, he came to London where he met his wife Lynn at a Royal College of Art sculpture show.

"In the end we came together and eventually married. She's a very fine sculptor

"We were in London for a long time. I had a great friend who moved to Brighton and we followed on as we came to like the idea of





Worthing, a seaside jewel

Alan said that he enjoys working and living in Worthing after many years in London, New York and by the Mediterranean.

"I spent many years in Spain by the Mediterranean. And living in Worthing is as close as I can get in England. It sometimes reminds me of the Mediterranean when I walk down in the Spring. It's absolutely stunningly beautiful. I mean Worthing is a sort of forgotten charming little village in many ways.

"I can buy fish at the end of my road in Spring and then come home and cook it. It's a fantastic thing to do."



being by the sea.

"Eventually we began to visit Worthing and found it very charming. It's smaller with some lovely buildings and not as frantic as Brighton."

Alan works in oil for the paintings. Much of his sculpture is mild steel and reclaimed items like brake drums and discs because he likes their dimensions and "curious indentation".

His works begin life as small models before he gets out his heavy cutting gear.

"What I usually do is take a small roll of card and I make a tiny maquette. I make it out of that and then I get my proportions.

"Big pieces have to be done like that or I would run into a load of problems later and at those sizes it's costly and time-consuming if I make a mistake."

He buys and sources his materials locally.

"I go to a fabrication yard I know in Hove, Colburns. I go there and look

around and see if there's anything interesting that's discarded. They have been incredibly helpful to me over the years. I have been going there a long time. Everyone there has been marvellous. Welders are unique. They really are incredibly talented and kind people. They do a very dangerous job and they do it very meticulously. They are really something."

The raw material is an open ended tube that Colburns produces for Alan.

"The steel comes in and then I have it rolled. They have an enormous roller, an incredible 100-year-old machine. They put a piece of sheet steel in and it goes through and is turned and becomes open tubing and that is what I work with.

"Once I have the tube, I cut it with acetylene. I went to college in London for about six weeks to learn how to do it. I was the worst welder there. I have a dodgy eye and if I weld on a straight

line, I can't do it.

"All kinds of images come out and I cut it different ways. Then they're welded together and angle-ground. The grinder gives you finishes of all sorts or you can cut into it with a grinder as well to create shapes.

"I either leave them clean and then varnish them or I paint them in a particular way and then take the angle grinder and remove part of the paint to get linear work within the colour. That ties it all together and makes it much more interesting and brings the steel into play. So you see the steel as well as the colour. Otherwise why bother? It is steel after all. But that gives it a fantastically interesting finish."

Typically, it takes Alan two months to create one of his pieces. He has been working in mild steel for about 20 years.

Prices for his sculptures range from £1,200 to around £10,000 depending upon the piece.



A retail landmark

One of Alan's sculptures has pride of place in the window of Guitar Junction in Worthing's High Street. His fourteen-year-old son Spencer, a keen guitarist who attends Worthing High School, has been going to the shop for many years.

"When Spencer was 10, they would let him go in there and play the instruments and I became friends with David Crozier who runs it. When they moved into their new premises, I saw this mannequin they had in the window and I said you can't have a mannequin in the window. It's too beautiful a shop for that.

"I said what about commissioning me to do a piece of sculpture? So they did and it all stemmed from Spencer's interest in the guitar."



See the work

Alan Tobias-Williams
Thunder & Tempest
Sculptures in the Garden and
Garden Gallery
Until 23 April, Free entrance

Worthing Museum and Art Gallery
Chapel Road
Worthing
West Sussex
BN11 1HPT
Open Tuesday to Saturday
10am to 5pm
01903 221067 Tuesday to Friday
01903 221448 Saturdays

