



**William Peers**  
*The Space Between*

10 June – 9 July 2016



## William Peers

By Philip Marsden

I have been visiting William Peers at his converted Cornish mill on and off now for a decade and a half. I have watched his children grow from babes-in-arms to robust teenagers. I have seen the house itself flourish under his own skilled hand. And I have followed his sculpture through each stage of its adventuring course – from the deceptive lightness of the green Hornton stone panels, the broken ping-pong ball shapes of his early use of marble and the remarkable 100-Day Series when he conceived, carved and polished a sculpture a day, each day, for a hundred days.

In all that time I have never been struck so powerfully as I am now, standing on the threshold of a newly re-built barn above the house. The conversion itself has been carried out in large part by him; it is not yet finished and the wind pumps a blue tarpaulin in and out of the window cavities. Scattered across the rough concrete floor – on chipboard plinths and wooden trestles, or on the floor half-wrapped in dust cloth – are the sculptures for his 2016 show. They are randomly distributed rather than arranged, like a crowd waiting for something to happen. But they fill that draughty room with a presence so haunting that I find myself at once under their spell, wandering among them, trying to identify their enigmatic appeal.

In many ways the work is signature Peers: geometric, technically brilliant, clean-curved. It



combines some of the materials he has worked with over the years, the pinkish Portuguese marble and the pale-grey Carrara marble (from the same quarries as Michelangelo's *Pietà* in St Peter's Basilica). Many of the pieces themselves are recognisable as variations on old themes, or at least extensions of them. Yet what is striking this time is that there is no overarching idea. The work is stripped to its sculptural essence, a celebration of form and shape, and the capacity of the simplest of things – perhaps *only* the simplest - to radiate harmony.

During the period of production Peers has been well aware of the work's elusive nature, and has found it deeply liberating. The process is about faith, he says, about knowing that if you don't exert thematic control, something will always emerge, something of greater worth. 'You sit there becalmed in your little boat, resisting the urge to steer, just waiting for the wind. Sometimes you think you're stuck, then

the subtlest of breezes comes up and takes you in a direction you would never have taken yourself.'

In the kitchen of the house – with its clay floor-tiles dug, shaped, fired and laid by Peers – a black-and-white print has just arrived in the post. It was sent by an old friend. In their late teens, the two of them had sailed across to France in a sixteen-foot open boat. For weeks they hopped down the coast, sleeping on the beach, scrounging food, until the boat came a-cropper in Spain. The photograph shows Peers sitting on the sand like Robinson Crusoe, wearing nothing but trunks and a bandana. But he is carving, whittling at a pole with a knife.

'Ever the sculptor,' I say.

'As I recall,' he corrects, 'I was trying to make a new mast.'

Eventually they abandoned the boat and came back on the ferry.

Footloose courage, idealism, a genius for the practical – all these are there in that photograph, and all are there in his current exhibition. William Peers has always been an artist of masterful integrity: his life and his work effortlessly combine deep-held convictions with everyday constraints. Likewise there is little in the weightless abstractions of his sculpture to suggest the sheer graft that goes into them.

Above the yard where he works, lying amidst sedge grass in a field of rough pasture, is the raw material, the blocks of rough marble. Spray-painted on them are WILLIAM PEERS, from the time when he tagged the pieces as they lay in the quarry. The stone is then cut, heaved and crated across Europe to be deposited here in Cornwall. Peers has a Matbro telehandler that can hoist three-and-a-half tons (for larger loads, his neighbouring farmer brings his own machine and they work in tandem); the crane sits in an open-sided barn above the yard – a mechanical ox,

squat and functional. In the yard below lies a hulk of white marble, an erratic dropped by the telehandler to await its first shaping. Just below that is the makeshift shelter where he works – there are no sides and the roof is cloudy Perspex, beneath which stands a gantry-and-chain that he has rigged to move the pieces as he works at them. And here he stands for hour after hour machine-grinding, then hand-polishing – sanding, sanding, sanding the stone until it is no longer a piece of the earth but something that hovers above it, framing its own bit of space.

Peers reckons that for each finished sculpture some eighty per cent of the original block is lost. What is left behind are shards and splinters and dust. Dust lies everywhere – on every object left out, on every drill-bit and off-cut, on the moulds that hang on the workshop shelves. It covers the ground, and the rain and moisture that seeps down across the yard has turned it to a kaolin-like sludge that is soft underfoot.

*Fwish ... fwish ... fwish ...* Peers bends over an almost finished piece, a continuous helix of smoothed-off marble. He is rubbing its curved limbs into life. The mechanical aids of the early stages are gone and now he is working by hand, allowing him to feel the stone as he shapes it. Every stroke loosens a few granules and every stroke contributes to the form. He believes that created objects hold in them all the industry that went into their production. 'Not just the attention that is paid them – but the *intention*.'

His work is testament to that. It has reached such a point now that it is more than the hours he spends on each one, the particular intent that he begins with and carries through to the last rubbing. The pieces here are a culmination of all the years of previous work, a distillation of previous ideas, of all the rock that has passed through his yard. In their purity they are ageless, and they touch something universal.



*Still Crenham* 2015  
Carrara marble  
79 x 61 x 20 cm (including base)  
Kilkenny limestone base



*Vanya* 2016  
Carrara marble  
120 x 133 x 40 cm (including base)  
Tunisian black marble base



*Polette 2015*  
Portuguese marble  
66 x 50 x 11 cm (including base)  
Kilkenny limestone base



*Corinth 2015*  
Portuguese marble  
77 x 65 x 13 cm (including base)  
Kilkenny limestone base





*Po* 2016  
Carrara marble  
77 x 48 x 37 cm (including base)  
Kilkeny limestone base



*Corelli* 2015  
Portuguese marble  
61 x 49 x 8 cm (including base)  
Kilkeny limestone base



*Lynaeus* 2015  
Portuguese marble  
49 x 34 x 34 cm (including base)  
Kilkenny limestone base



*Galvano* 2016  
Carrara marble  
138 x 120 x 18 cm (including base)  
Kilkenny limestone base





*Fraenir* 2016  
Portuguese marble  
47 x 38 x 16 cm (including base)  
Kilkeny limestone base



*Kotori* 2015  
Carrara marble  
46 x 76 x 19 cm (including base)  
Kilkeny limestone base



## William Peers – biography

(b. 1965, UK)

William Peers studied at Falmouth Art College after which he was apprenticed to a stone-carver, Michael Black, who urged him to work slowly and entirely by hand. Peers worked in the marble quarries of Carrara, Italy, and later spent time in Corsica where he found a tranquil retreat to work and develop his ideas. His earliest carvings were figurative and followed the long history of English stone carving brought to prominence by Henry Moore and Eric Gill.

In the 1990s Peers moved to Cornwall, and there followed a period of fifteen years where he exclusively carved relief sculptures in Hornton Stone. Over time his work has become increasingly abstract. In 2007 he created a large series of work in Portuguese marble. The change of material had a dramatic effect on the style of his work. In 2010 he embarked on a series 100 Days: Sketched in Marble in which he carved a marble sculpture each day for one hundred days. Working repeatedly within a time limit led him to a bolder approach to carving. Recently the relationship between positive and negative shapes has become an interest, and several larger works for the landscape have seen a dramatic change in scale in his work.

Past exhibitions include six solo exhibitions with John Martin Gallery as well as exhibitions in New York and San Francisco. Public exhibitions include On Form at Asthall Manor, Woburn Abbey and Glyndebourne.

BACK COVER

*Gamelin* 2015

Portuguese marble

56 x 53 x 14 cm (including base)

Portuguese marble base



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