

June 22, 2012 10:05 pm

Just what the collector ordered

By Sophie Hastings

Commissioning sculpture is a delicate art. The choice and adaptability of sites is a bonus for artists



'Life Mounds', Charles Jencks' ever-changing work at Jupiter Artland (2005-present)

Robert Wilson is out of breath, gasping down the telephone. “We’re replanting all the ferns we dug up for the installation and we’re against the clock. Everything has to be ready for the opening.” His wife, Nicky, explains that the unveiling of the latest site-specific work created in their 100-acre Scottish sculpture park, Jupiter Artland, Anya Gallaccio’s “The Light Shines Out of Me”, must take place on June 21: it will be the focus of their annual midsummer’s eve celebration, complete with cocktails and fire-eaters.

Deep in the woods, Gallaccio’s 3 sq m underground grotto chamber clad in amethyst

crystals mined in Brazil, surrounded by a field of obsidian and gold barbed wire, is an inversion of the traditional country house folly. “I wanted to engage with the landscape, which is both formal and wild,” she says, “but the healing properties of amethyst are also a reference to Robert’s family company, Nelson’s [homeopathic remedies]. My friendship with the Wilsons is the icing on the cake. I’m always surprised when contemporary art collectors don’t want anything to do with the artists – at Jupiter, their involvement is part of the process.”

Nicky describes building their collection as “intoxicating.

There is sheer joy in talking to an artist who wants to be here, a place where they can realise big projects and respond to the land in complete freedom.” Artland has commissioned works by Charles Jencks, Cornelia Parker, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Anish Kapoor, Marc Quinn and Antony Gormley.

The park is open to the public in the summer and an education programme with free access for children is central to the Wilsons’ vision. “From my window, I can see 50 eight-year-olds running about,” says Nicky. “They can touch, take things away in their pockets, paint, copy, pretend to be Andy Goldsworthy ...” Goldsworthy’s fourth work at Artland, “Coppice Room”, was unveiled this week, as was Tania Kovats’ “Rivers”, 100 specimens of water taken from 100 rivers in the UK, stored in a boathouse by a lake that was enlarged for the project. When Gormley needed the hill he chose as his site to be higher, the Wilsons added 100,000 tonnes of topsoil.

Commissioning is clearly a life’s work for the Wilsons, and the choice and adaptability of sites at Artland is an unusual bonus for the artists but this is part of a wider trend. Site-specific opportunities in both the private and public spheres are increasing because of planning conditions that require developers to include art in their schemes, a growing openness to collaboration on the part of architects, and a generation of artists keen to push their practice beyond the white cube exhibition space.

“There is a groundswell of art in the public realm,” says Vivien Lovell, director of Modus Operandi, which acts as art consultant and curator for developers, architects, health, housing and transport projects, universities and places of worship. “It’s a challenging process – there are different interests that have to be fulfilled.” There was scepticism among parishioners, she says, over Shirazey Houshiary’s commission to create a new east window for the church of St Martin-in-the-Fields on London’s Trafalgar Square, mostly about the placing of contemporary art in a traditional building. “But now they love it.”

Commissioning art as opposed to buying ready-made work from a gallery is a risk. The outcome is never certain, proposals and maquettes notwithstanding, and in the public sphere a diverse and often

uninitiated audience can cause difficulties. But Lovell likes artists to experiment, to try new materials. “The best work often comes from a fresh approach,” she says.

Lovell oversaw three commissions for London’s Olympic park. Dan Harvey and Heather Ackroyd planted trees to form metaphorical gateways into the park, encircled by metal rings engraved with records of the site’s history; Carsten Nicolai built a mesh fence with an oscillating sound wave pattern playing across it; Monica Bonvicini’s “Run”, with the three letters depicted as monumental sculptures constructed of steel, glass and LED lighting, is, says

Lovell, “a crowd-pleaser, as well as formally and conceptually strong. ‘Run’ is overt and conveys its message instantly, while the trees are a slow burner. Public art can be subtle too.”

Lovell works frequently with the University of Oxford, currently liaising with Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron on the Blavatnik School of Government building. “We get in right at the beginning so that contemporary art is seen in relation to the architecture and is incorporated into the building.”

She cites the work of Conrad Shawcross, such as his “beautiful piece” for Magdalen Science Park, as exemplifying this kind of interdisciplinary sensibility. Shawcross says: “I have a real interest in taking on space, looking from an architectural perspective at how you affect people’s behaviour, how you orient people when they want to stop for a while.” His 15-metre aluminium work at Magdalen hangs from the ceiling, representing a chord falling into silence. “I am aware that people will have to live with it every day, whereas in a gallery it’s more a one-off hit. Public work has to have a high impact, be the iconic centre or heart of a building, but without a fatigue factor, so people don’t hate it after a month.”

Another of Shawcross’s public commissions is “Space Trumpet” at London’s Unilever Building, which comprises four enormous gramophone horns installed on a suspended platform 23m high, in the main atrium of the building. The 1.5-tonne ply, oak and steel system moves silently every day at midday for five minutes, to give a subtly different view. “A kinetic piece is fine in a gallery but if you have to live with constant movement, it becomes a washing machine,” Shawcross says. It’s also important to be aware of campaigners and drunken climbers when making public work, he warns. “A lot of things look attractive to climb if you’re drunk.”

The 20-year-old Cass Sculpture Foundation in West Sussex has no such concerns,



Shirazey Houshiary's east window at St Martin-in-the-Fields

commissioning works to sell to private clients who come increasingly from Russia, China and India. “We offer artists the chance to create something they’ve always dreamed of and haven’t had the money to make,” says founder Wilfred Cass. “We give them the funds – anything between £10,000 and £800,000 – and install the piece in our grounds. We promote it and when we sell we get our money back, splitting what’s left with the artist.”

Artists are invited from all over the world and respond to the land but work is not site-specific; sculptures are moved around the grounds as pieces are sold and new ones installed. “I don’t agree with the orthodoxy that things need to be site-specific,” he says, “but we’ll let artists choose a site. We just warn them it may move.”

Cass has now launched two curated fields with exhibitions changing annually, so works are in situ for a while, allowing a dialogue to develop between artists. British sculptor Tony Cragg has taken one field and US artist David Brooks the other.

“A lot of artists of my generation make work with a clear nod to context,” says Brooks. “Commissions are highly valued and very much a part of how contemporary artists work.”

One of his works is a 23m blue whale in stainless steel tubing placed within a matrix of scaffolding. “I wanted to point out the absurdity of the impact we have on the natural world. I like the idea of one organism competing with our dominance of the landscape.”

www.jupiterartland.org

www.modusoperandi-art.com

www.sculpture.org.uk

Printed from: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/5695459a-b938-11e1-b4d6-00144feabdc0.html>

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute to others.

© THE FINANCIAL TIMES LTD 2012 FT and ‘Financial Times’ are trademarks of The Financial Times Ltd.