

# FORCES OF NATURE

Contemporary artists are harnessing the power of the elements in new and mesmerising ways to give life to dynamic garden sculptures. **Helen Chislett** explores these kinetic marvels

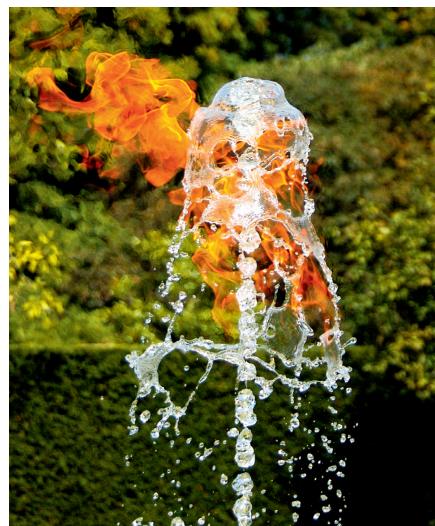
**A**nyone who has visited the legendary Colombe d'Or hotel in Provence will be familiar with the monumental mobile by Alexander Calder that stands by the pool. Part of the joy of the setting is watching the piece sway in the breeze, echoing the ripples of the cypress trees that punctuate the gardens. Kinetic sculptures such as this add energy and interest to the landscape, not least because the movement is controlled by nature rather than man. "I like to create sculpture without ego – it is the water or the wind that adds the final layer of magic," says artist and landscape architect David Harber, who founded his award-winning eponymous studio over two decades ago. "The way it

moves is unquantifiable – it is the environment itself that creates the joy, so a piece is never finished until it is set within the landscape."

While Harber is well-known internationally for his garden water features, he does not consider the addition of water sufficient to describe a work as kinetic. "Water or air has to make some physical difference to a piece," he says. "It is all about the interaction between the art and the environment. A sculpture that is completely static once the water is switched off cannot be described as truly kinetic." Instead, he cites *Quiver* (from £5,191, pictured on final page), which features flame-shaped petals swaying on rods of steel, imitating the movement of crops. "It is particularly beautiful at night when it bobs around like fireflies," he says. Harber has also designed a moving sculpture that acts as a functional bird scarer for a client in Connecticut. "They live in a beautiful house overlooking the river, but the lawn is overrun with geese

and knee-deep in guano," he laughs. Made of bronze and stainless steel, *Wings* (similar commissions from £54,000) shimmers in the wind, creating occasional random movements as if it is flapping its arms.

While such works are often impressive in scale, kinetic artists pride themselves on the simplicity of the mechanics used to achieve the effect they want – to harness motors would in some sense feel like cheating. Angela Conner is one of Britain's most prolific sculptors who has been creating large kinetic pieces for over 40 years. In her early years, she worked in Dame Barbara Hepworth's celebrated St Ives studio before she went on to set up her own London studio, creating mobile works that are moved by natural forces such as water, wind, gravity and sunlight. Her sculptures feature in public and private collections worldwide, including the 39m-high *Irish Wave* in Dublin – the tallest kinetic sculpture in Europe. For Conner, vision comes first and then mechanics follow. "We are all besieged by technology – which is wonderful, except you don't have any idea how to fix a computer if it goes bust," she says. "I prefer to make it easy to see why something moves,



Clockwise from far left:  
Angela Conner's *Revelation* sculpture at Chatsworth House harnesses gravity and the weight of water as the outer petals of a metallic globe open to reveal a golden sphere within. Houghton Hall sculpture park in Norfolk features Jeppie Hein's *Waterflame*, which combines water and fire to hypnotic effect. Allen Jones's painted aluminium mobile *High Wire*, about £120,000, at the New Art Centre in Salisbury



**From top:** *Resonance*, from £15,000, by Thomas Joynes harnesses the power of water to create tunes as it cascades down onto the plates. Andrew Lee's precision-engineered *Flow*, £5,394, which is on show in The Hannah Peschar Sculpture Garden in Surrey, is made from carbon-fibre rods that illustrate the path of the wind

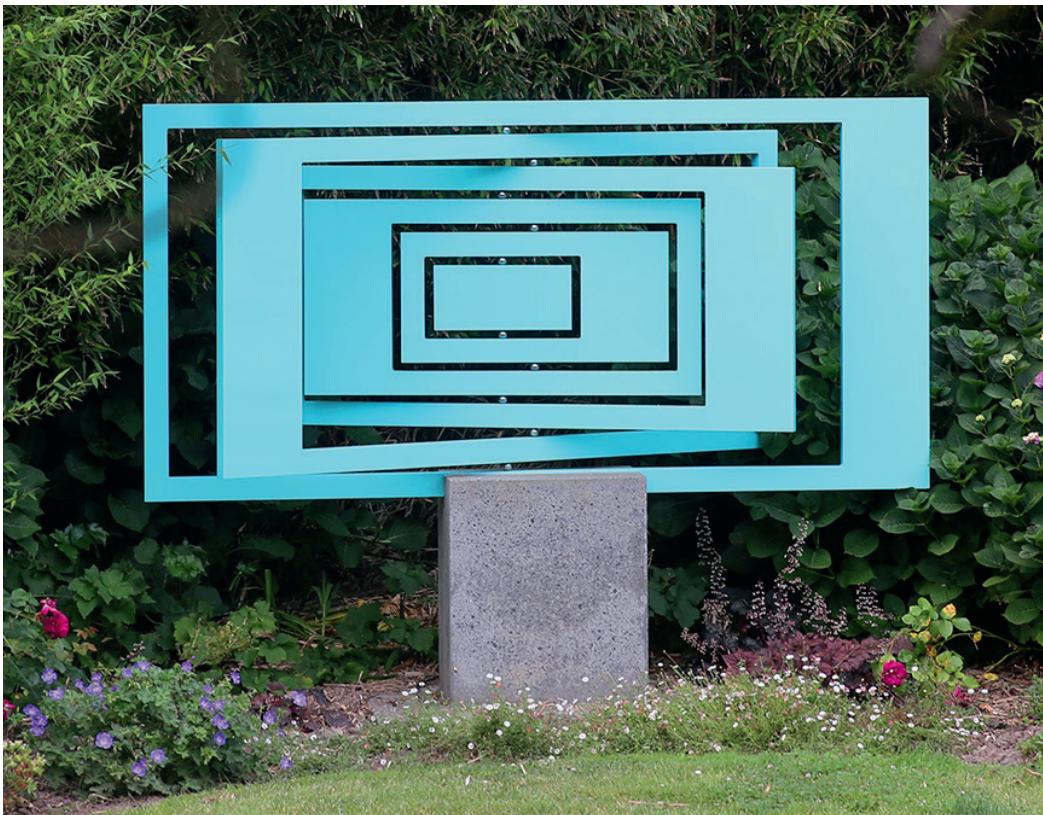
falls or swings – that simplicity makes the works peaceful things to encounter. I have noticed that when something moves, people stop rushing about and actually look – we all need to do that now and again."

Last year, Conner installed *Renaissance* (prices for bespoke commissions available on request) at Hatfield House, the home of the Marquess and Marchioness of Salisbury. Water cascades down to two large split rings, collecting at the base where the weight causes them to rise. As they do so, the water is shed, causing them to sink again. A second mechanism prompts mist to appear and sends a huge golden globe rising from beneath the water's surface, which then sinks back down again – a metaphor for the fall and rise of the house's history. The harnessing of gravity and the weight of water is something of a Conner signature, exemplified by *Revelation* (pictured on previous pages), a piece commissioned by the 11th Duke and Duchess of Devonshire at Chatsworth, where outer petals open and close as the weight of the water changes, again revealing a golden globe within, this time referencing the Devonshire's long tradition of fostering artistic talent and then revealing it to the world. However, one of Conner's best-known pieces is the wind sculpture *Poise* (from £84,000, editions of six) made of marble dust suspended in resin. "Each segment swings at a different rate to the others, because they vary in shape, size and weight," she says. "Each form is slightly curved, so it creates its own interactions with sunlight and shadow."

For those keen on finding inspiration, the great country houses of England are increasingly showing a sense of adventure in their curation. At Houghton Hall's contemporary sculpture park, *Waterflame* (pictured on previous pages) by Berlin-based Jeppe Hein astonishes visitors, combining two opposing elements – water and fire – within a deceptively minimalist design. Hein is the master of using natural elements, such as water, light and fire to create installations that translate the surroundings into the artistic concept. He enjoys the fact that these works stimulate multiple reactions. "From amusement to fear, curiosity to doubt, wonder to surprise – this is social sculpture inserted into everyday life," he says. "I like to make the viewer question what they are seeing." Lord Cholmondeley, owner of Houghton Hall, describes Hein as a conjuror using water, fire and magnetic fields as his medium. "His work is playful and easy to enjoy," he says, "but the science and technicalities behind it are often hard to figure out – magic appears at the heart of Hein's work." The sculpture is part of Lord Cholmondeley's collection and is not for sale, but a similar piece can be commissioned (price on request) through König Galerie.

More creativity is on view at The Hannah Peschar Sculpture Garden in Surrey where kinetic works are positioned artfully among the trees, ponds and gardens of the 10-acre estate. Co-curator Vikki Leedham recognises there is something captivating about kinetic sculpture. "As human beings, we are tuned to register movement – when that movement is integral to a piece of sculpture, the result is mesmerising," she says. The first kinetic sculptures exhibited in the garden 20 years ago were simple pieces suspended from trees, animated only by the breeze, but Leedham says technological excellence has vastly increased the possibilities today. "Take *Flow* [£5,394, pictured left] by Andrew Lee, a shoal of carbon-fibre rods that illustrate the path of the wind through 150 precision-engineered tell-tales [this being a nautical term for the piece of yarn or fabric attached to a sail], or the meticulously weighted *WV 401* [€5,712] by German artist Michael Hischer, which is in endless, poetic movement and is an example of a simple form executed absolutely perfectly," she says. "Since the moment we hung it from the magnificent catalpa tree, it has not stopped its gentle dance."

Another delightful setting for exploring and commissioning kinetic sculpture is the New Art Centre in Salisbury. Among the works on display are the *High Wire* painted aluminium mobile (unique piece, about £120,000, pictured on previous pages) by Allen Jones and two sculptures (editions of six and seven from



**From top:** Ivan Black's *Don't Ask Me*, £45,000, was inspired by small works he made using magnets as pivot points to engender movement. *Quiver*, from £5,191, by David Harber uses flame-shaped petals swaying on steel rods to imitate the movement of crops in the breeze



*"I like the way kinetic sculptures take on an energy of their own – that there are forces interacting that are out of your control"*

CLIVE RICHARD IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND KÖNIG GALERIE. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND NEW ART CENTRE. JOHN BULMER (3)

£10,000 each) by Michael Hischer. New Art Centre director Stephen Feeke says kinetic sculptures appeal because they animate the landscape. "The beauty of working with the outdoors is that the environment changes all the time – from minute to minute, week to week and month to month. Sculpture such as this looks completely different in November to May," he says. "In many ways, works by artists such as Jones and Hischer come to life most in the winter months when the trees are bare and the space opens up – that is when the colour and movement come into their own. You have something that is populating the space, which is in a sense replacing the human figure."

However, it is difficult for up-and-coming talents to escape the long shadows that are literally cast by Calder. Artist Ivan Black admits that although he's always had a great love of making mobiles, for a long time he was initially frustrated by the difficulty of finding his own clear artistic direction. "When I set my first kinetic sculpture in motion, it was a real eureka moment, because it was so dynamic and unlike anything I had seen before. That one idea gave me the confidence to pursue my love of kinetics and everything I have made since can be traced back to that piece. There is something about combining art, design and invention that has a unique appeal." *Blue Squares* (unique piece, £30,000) typifies his love of wind sculptures, playing with ideas of geometry and repetition, while *Don't Ask Me* (unique piece, £45,000, pictured above) was inspired by small works he made using magnets as pivot points to engender movement. A more recent commission is *Hex* (unique piece, £60,000) for a collector in Western Australia that sits in the centre of a koi carp pond and is kept in continuous motion by a local wind known as the Fremantle Doctor.

Artist Thomas Joynes was inspired by the Fibonacci series – in which each number is the sum of the preceding two – for his work *Resonance* (from £15,000, pictured on previous page, made to commission through London Connoisseur). Fibonacci dictates the size of the flat discs that spiral off the central core just as it dictates the number of petals on a plant. Water is fed through the core and then cascades down onto the plates. Using Harber's definition, this sculpture would

not be considered kinetic except for one important difference: it creates tunes as the water splashes down. For Joynes, this was the appeal: "I called it *Resonance* because it resonates in a musical way – you can hear the change in pitch according to the plate the water lands on, but the fact that you can't anticipate which this will be adds to the enjoyment and the experience. I like the way kinetic sculptures take on an energy of their own – that there are forces interacting that are out of your control."

It is the same ethos that Harber embraces in his work. "You can create two identical pieces, but once they are installed in different locations they are no longer identical," he says. "A sculpture that gently bobs around in the breeze of a London courtyard is very different to one installed on the coast of Cornwall that may churn around frantically. Every piece we make is a response to client and site. At its best, kinetic sculpture both enhances the landscape and takes its inspiration from it – it is the perfect synergy of materials, craftsmanship and fine engineering. Kinetics are not just about obvious and aggressive movement – sometimes you want to create a piece of metal that simply flutters in the wind, and that is very difficult to achieve." ♦

#### NEXT OF KINETIC

**Allen Jones**, see New Art Centre. **Andrew Lee**, see The Hannah Peschar Sculpture Garden. **Angela Conner**, 020-7221 4510; angelaconner.com. **David Harber**, Blewburton Barns, Hagbourne Road, Aston Upthorpe, Oxfordshire OX11 9EE (01235-859 300; davidharber.co.uk). **The Hannah Peschar Sculpture Garden**, Black & White Cottage, Standon Lane, Ockley, Surrey RH5 5QR (01306-627 269; hannahpescharsculpture.com). **Houghton Hall**, King's Lynn, Norfolk PE31 6UE (01485-528 569; houghtonhall.com). **Ivan Black**, 01834-849 564, ivanblack.com. **Jeppe Hein**, jeppehein.net and see Houghton Hall and König Galerie. **König Galerie**, St Agnes, Alexandrinienstrasse 118-121, Berlin 10969 (+4930-2610 3080; koeniggalerie.com). **London Connoisseur**, 49-51 Cheval Place, London SW7 (bespoke@londonconnoisseur.co.uk; londonconnoisseur.co.uk). **Michael Hischer**, see The Hannah Peschar Sculpture Garden and New Art Centre. **New Art Centre**, Roche Court, East Winterslow, Salisbury, Wiltshire SP5 1BG (01980-862 244; sculpture.uk.com). **Thomas Joynes**, thomasjoynes.com and see London Connoisseur.