

A Dance for Edward James



On a dewy October morning, my mother-in-law's Nissan Micra was ready under the plumping grapes of the pergola, packed with metal sheets, rods, tools, theatre stage backdrops and the broadest selection of paraphernalia, including some bones that I borrowed from my dog's private collection and a set of fake teeth found in a disused dentist studio in Southern Italy.

Clearly, I had been chosen as Maker-in-Residence at West Dean College, and I was going to make a big deal of it.

It would have been hard not to, anyway, since my 8 year old had been treating me like a national hero from the day the panel announced my selection.

The gentle rattling of copper, brass and lead accompanied me as the road unwound towards the coast in sinuous bends of giant ferns, until I spotted a large sign reading "Less Sat Nav - More Sculpture: Welcome to West Dean".

How very charming of them, I thought, to welcome me in such way.

My feelings were only confirmed as I entered my room, the Henry Moore Suite, much larger than where I used to live in Paris.

As a Maker-in-Residence, I had two weeks to realise the project outlined in my proposal, run a workshop, offer a lecture and set up an exhibition. Not bad, I said to myself, counting the days until my horse carriage was going to turn back into a pumpkin.

The piece that I had described in my application was going to be a *Dance Macabre*, a bridge between performance and sculpture composed of several balancing pieces in dialogue with each other, just as imaginary performers on a stage. I wanted to create something able to lift the spirit, with lightness, humour and allusions to the sublime, connecting the mundane with the poetic dimension. The idea still resonated within me strongly, but the macabre ambition of a memento mori had been macerating with me for over a year now, and I knew I was going to need to shift the attention towards something else - something more tangible - although I still didn't know what that was.

The first thing I did is hunt for some local stone, and found lots of flint of course, only to realise that it's virtually impossible to work or drill.

My serendipitous encounter with Paula Haughney, stone sculptor, not only led me to softer revelations such as chalk, but gave me the reassuring feeling of belonging, as she welcomed me in the most natural way to work with her students in the sunny stone carving yard.

By the end of Day 2, the elements of the *Dance Macabre* were precariously together, held in place mostly by gravity, ready to collapse upon each other with the slightest vibration. Balancing a scythe above its head, Death was standing in front of a rather ambiguous character representing Vanity, sharing strong resemblances with Pingu, the evergreen children's favourite penguin, holding an empty frame (an empty mirror?) hanging from the tip of his nose. It felt like I had started to exorcise the demons.

On Day 3, I was given a long tour of the archive and collection by Hugh Morrison and Simon Coleman: a waterfall of documents, stories, photographs, artworks, furniture and design. Simply breath taking. With the feeling of a delicious indigestion, I started to process all the new material and associations. On that evening, three new pieces were born in a burst of productivity. As it often happens in relatively large and quick litters, only two survived.

The next two days were dedicated to preparing and running a workshop for the Metalwork students. Metal and Conservation Subject Leaders Eric Nordgren and Grant McCaig had offered me their invaluable support from the very beginning of my stay, so now it was my turn to give something back. A walk through the gardens and glasshouses clarified the outline of the plan: I simply had to start from the natural world. To be more precise, from the Loofah Glasshouse.

The idea of making a loofah mobile (if you are a novice to loofahs like I was, look [here](#)) was received enthusiastically by the students, as we started to study the plant and fruit's structure by drawing, and then set off to forage for materials.

I hadn't expected that the process of communal decision making could lead to such level of complicity, and by late afternoon, after experimenting in the forge and patination laboratory, a huge trunk was standing in the courtyard, as the base of a rather ambitious stamobile made of roots, brass, iron, steel and hay, and our giggles filled the air.

Despite the tiredness I couldn't resist and explore more patination, and that evening, in the peace of an empty workshop, a new universe of colours and textures opened to me.

The next day, I woke up missing my family terribly and simultaneously felt clearly the need for a cohesive plan for my second week.

Which pieces was I going to show in the final display? How? Where? What type of lecture was I going to offer? Who was my audience?

As often in these cases of deep questioning, I decided to go shopping with the pretext of the need for a new backdrop. Here, a new serendipitous encounter with artist and shopkeeper Andrew Dickinson got me out of my blues and reinforced the feeling of belonging that had been growing in me, like the sense of being part of a broader family.

To my greatest surprise, my very own family decided then to visit me and we spent the most idyllic Sunday together. It had never been so exhilarating to embrace my child and husband: never been so hard to say goodbye either.

A new feeling, that of being in exile, pervaded me while I watched the stream brushing the wild watercress, like the opening scene of *Solaris* by Tarkovsky. The wind was strong up high in the tree tops. I then remembered that I still had with me the key to the sculpture courtyard, right in my pocket, and, although the day was almost over, I decided to drag myself there together with the *Danse Macabre* maquette.

The yard was looking very metaphysical with its dusty stools and huge wooden benches.

After placing the maquette on a table, I grabbed a sheet of paper and sat staring at the sunset, totally empty. Some dark red apples were hanging from a young tree in front of me.

Almost automatically, I found a pencil, and while I sat drawing it, I had with the apple tree the following imaginary dialogue:

APPLE TREE - Isn't it nice, up here, in the sculpture yard, when the sun goes down?

VIVIANA ROSSI-CAFFELL - Oh yes. The wind seems to have calmed down a bit.

A.T. - Still, I wouldn't trust it, with your delicate sculptures. Look at what it's done to my apples, here on the ground!

Are you... are you drawing me? I didn't know you could draw. Isn't your work abstract?

V.R.C. - You can say that, yes. My thing with abstraction must relate to the way I absorb information and I store my memory. Apart from some rare occasions, most of the experience that I'm exposed to only leaves a very abstract imprint on me, as if, in order to be assimilated, it had to be translated with the help of a code.

It's a sort of simplification, a distortion, although very precise, into a language that is acceptable for me to retain. It may sound very clever, and I'd have no issues with that, if it wasn't for the fact that, when I am wanting to convert those imprints back into practical terms, or when I need to recall a memory, the code doesn't work, and there is no way to revert to the original.

A.T. - Oh dear. Never had such a problem.

By the way, don't mind me asking, but why are you so late?

V.R.C. - Late? Well, I've spent the week in the metal workshop, making my pieces, I've run what's called a Masterclass for the students, I've been through the archives and the collection...

A.T. - No, no, I didn't mean that. I meant in your life. How come you only got to call yourself a sculptor at nearly forty?

V.R.C. - (with a pause, to recompose after the surprise of such bluntness coming from an apple tree) Well, tree... I guess I've spent a long time busy with my own windmills, to use an image from Don Quixote. Have you read Cervantes?

A.T. - (rather annoyed) No.

V.R.C. - What I mean is that we all get to ripen our fruits in different ways.

Think of the agave. All those years preparing, preparing, only to flower once, and then die. When you compare it to the woodland strawberry that doesn't even need a seed necessarily to be born - it just hops to the ground and sets roots from one of its mum's runners - and bears fruits in matter of months, really, they couldn't be more different, and yet they are both plants.

I'm going to tell you something very personal now, that I've never shared with anyone else.

This isn't the first time that I've spoken to an apple tree.

When I was living in my parents' home, in Italy, there was this apple tree that we used to call "duo melo", because it had been grafted in order to produce two varieties of fruits. It had been

a very productive tree from the day we got it, rather young, just like you are, and its apples had the sweetest and juiciest crunch I've ever found. It was planted right by the steps that led to my home, so I would walk through it every day. And every day it grew, and prepared for more and more fruit.

I remember once, it was this time of year; and it was raining.

The leaves had mostly all gone and the red apples were shimmering heavily - where I come from, when it rains, it really rains - glowing in the dark grey sky. I rushed with my camera (I was dreaming of being a photographer in those days) to capture this image of bountiful burden, that related so closely to how I felt: the strenuous effort of this small tree to keep hold of all his fruits, each one so round and beautiful, each one carrying the sweetest promise, the promise of creation, of pleasure and, ultimately, through the seed, the promise of eternal life.

That's exactly how I felt. I was cultivating the arts then, superficially I must say, but pretty much every single one of them: from ballet to calligraphy, without neglecting archery, rock music, martial arts and screenwriting, to name some. I felt just like that "duo melo". And that's when I realised that I was going to need to cut a few branches if I wanted any of my fruit to get to maturity.

That's what I've been doing in these years, tree. Pruning, basically.

So, don't be cross with the wind, because it's actually helping you to lighten your load.

By that time, it was dark, and the pencil was just following the memory of the tree's outline on the paper.

I found my way to the College, feeling much much lighter.

The day after, I started making the Little Theatre for Edward James, the piece I would have never conceived if it hadn't been for West Dean: a flamboyant celebration of its founder in his polyhedric complexity, represented here by a polished cube, placed in the middle of the stage like a chess piece.

One after the next, day after day, the elements that had been accumulating on my bench and in my mind started to take their place in the little theatre, with no real distinction between performers and set design.

Just in time for my talk and final display in the glasshouse, the piece came together: green snakes arrived directly from Las Pozas to frame the stage, waves of burned metal emerged from the ground to remind us of the power of Nature, and the copper lips of Mae West materialized above everything else, floating like an apparition that's about to vanish.

My deepest gratitude goes to Alison Baxter and Sarah Hughes for placing their trust in me, and to all the students, teachers and technicians for their help and patience.

Finally, a special thanks to Woody Allen for causing the spark that led to the residency, with his *Danse Macabre* in *Everyone Says I Love You* (link [here](#) to the scene).