

Exhibition Review: Ashurst Emerging Artist Prize for Sculpture

The headquarters of Ashurst LLP in London's Spitalfields have been transformed, suddenly inhabited by a vast and vibrant array of sculptures that are immediately recognisable as the work of Alexandra Harley. Harley is the 2021 winner of the Ashurst Emerging Artist Prize for Sculpture and this is her largest solo exhibition to date, featuring eleven artworks spanning a creative period of the last six years.

The exhibition has a personal, intimate feel that is reinforced when I learn that it has been curated by the artist herself, both in terms of the selection of artworks and their display. The pieces are installed alongside one another in a linear fashion, enabling the viewer to take in one, some or all of them in a single gaze as well as from disparate vantage points. This unusual layout facilitates a physical and contemplative journey through years and layers of Harley's artistic practice, encouraging a non-static experience of sculptures that are themselves characterised by movement.

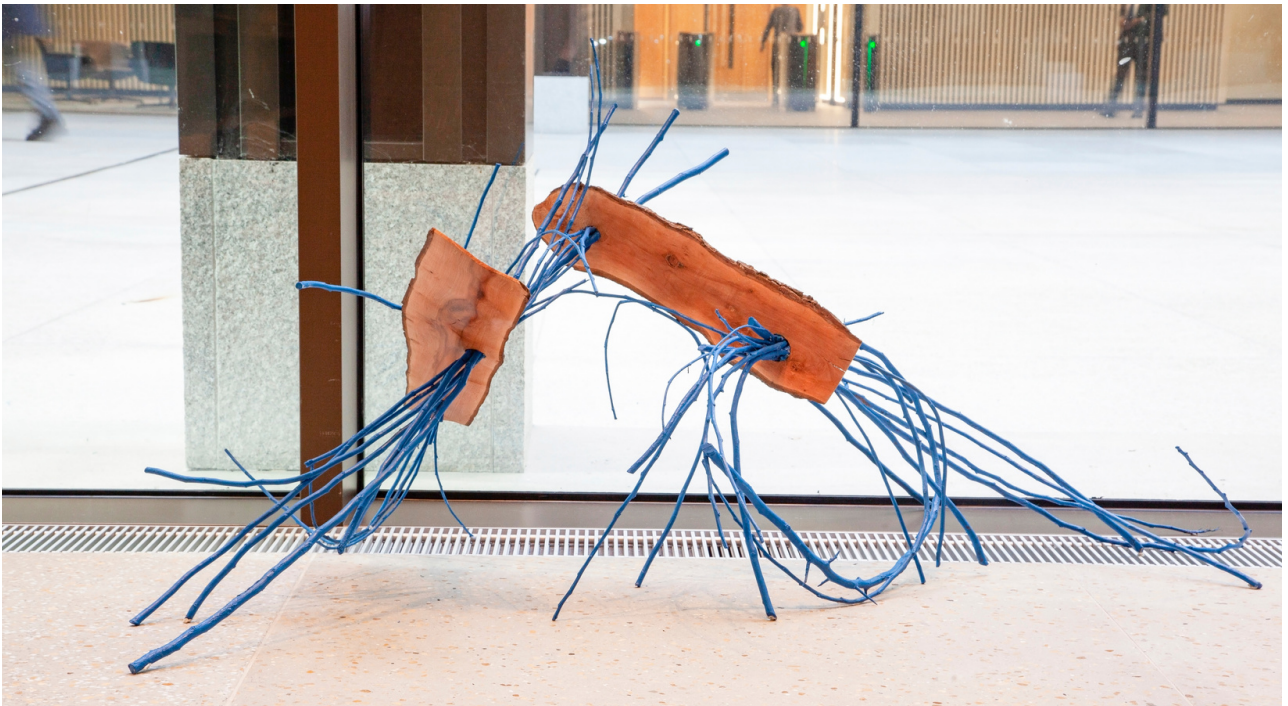


The artist's extraordinary ability to capture and render motion in a seemingly effortless manner is a testament to her long-term engagement and experimentation with materials, primarily bronze, wood and ceramic. Harley is evidently inspired by their inherent, diverse physicalities, taking an exploration of their individual strengths, limits and contradictions as a starting point. As a result of this deeply processual approach, a single sculpture can take the artist years to complete. This was the case with *Raff*, a striking ash-coloured piece that is slightly set apart from the others in the exhibition, occupying a solitary plinth at the building's main entrance and exit, making it the first and final encounter.

A complex piece, it is crafted from saw-cut wood, twigs and bark that are lashed together in multiple places with rough string, causing a visceral tension as the elements appear to writhe and wrestle with one another. Harley described reaching a certain point during its creation when it had to be set aside and left to settle for a long period before she felt compelled to revisit and rework it into its final form. When I first saw the work, perhaps due to the combination of its colouring and pervasive sense of tension, it recalled the Roman sculpture Laocoön and His Sons, which depicts an intense but perfectly balanced physical struggle between the Trojan priest, his children and giant, god-sent serpents.



Just as Harley does not commence a work with a final destination in mind, nor does she hold any predetermined 'readings' for her work, imposing no limitations on the viewer's experience and welcoming the disparate interpretations that her sculptures tend to evoke. Talking with the artist about the pieces in the exhibition reinforces this, as she eloquently narrates a process marked by confidence and open-mindedness in equal measure. Harley describes a fascinating two-way relationship with materials, in which they guide her and are celebrated on their own terms, while simultaneously being pushed to their limits and in often surprising directions. Adaxka encapsulates this combination of the organic yet unexpected. The artist has thoughtfully positioned this work at floor level, encouraging visitors to approach it from above and consider its sprawling breadth. Two planks of polished wood are raised to hover tentatively above the ground, supported by thin and curving string-like sticks painted a bright electric blue. As in many of Harley's works, colour plays a pivotal role. This particular shade of blue - taken from a discarded can of paint that the artist happened upon, serves to further uplift the sculpture in a more abstract, metaphorical sense. The bold intervention also calls into question the terminology of the natural and organic, their implications and what they can come to mean when coaxed into new, enlivened structures.



In spite of the diversity of works on show and the individual character, idiosyncratic structure and underlying method of each sculpture, there is a powerful coherence throughout the exhibition that transcends material, colour and size. This sense of cohesion takes both physical and immaterial form, attesting to the unique energy that inhabits Harley's works. Reflecting on this shared quality, the importance of absences and airways becomes clear. The gaps between elements in every sculpture are as fundamental and foundational as the materials themselves. Intricate three-dimensional spatial relationships are crafted using a variety of methods, from twisting, melting, piercing and splicing, to the deliberately off-kilter sawing of cross section logs in Zolemba that expose the intimate make-up of the wood's grain, rings and form.



Three recent and smaller-scale bronze sculptures, exhibited on a shared stone plinth, are a notable embodiment of the power that can be generated by these gaps and the pathways they create. Korapiloo presents as a swirling mass of glinting, brass coloured wires, whirling around two suspended bronze elements. On closer examination, the wires actually pierce and pass through the bronze, pushing and pulling their way through holes in the undulating, tubular green mass. This creates a mutually dependent relationship between part and whole, held together in a complex geometry that shifts according to the viewer's position. Tactile, sensual and visually stimulating, there is a rhythmic quality to these wire pieces that evokes a musical composition in which, somehow, individual notes and the overall composition are presented within one remarkable entity.



Throughout the exhibition, I got the sense that I was somehow immersed in the artist's process, not seeing a collection of works consigned to the past but entering at a point in which creative directions are manifest and manifold. In conversation with Harley, it emerged that the experience of planning and viewing the exhibition herself had indeed inspired ideas and inclinations to expand on and pursue. This only confirms the already tantalising atmosphere this exhibition generates, of an artist whose joyful mastery of materials and incredible, ongoing oeuvre cement her place as a leading voice in contemporary sculpture.