

The way of the WEAVE

Complementing the natural environment in which they sit, the garden willow sculptures handcrafted by artist Victoria Westaway range from whimsical figures to abstract forms

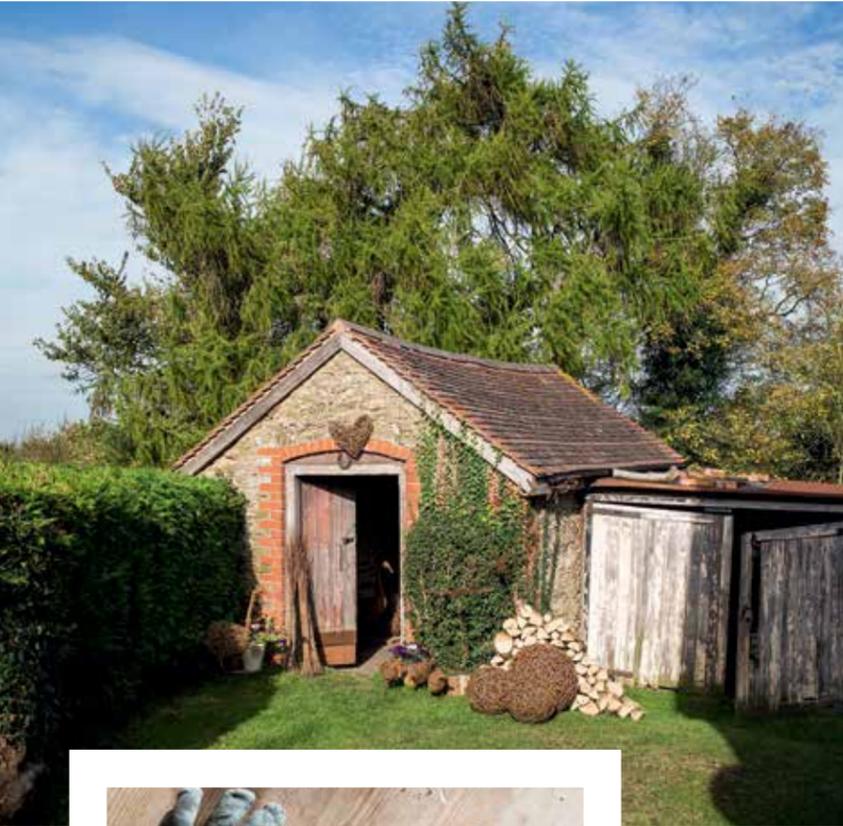
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Victoria holds a bundle of willow ready for weaving, with the backdrop of the bucolic Herefordshire landscape stretching out behind her

Victoria Westaway is wrapped up against the cold in her workshop, a small 19th-century stone barn next to her former farmworker's cottage, perched on the crest of a hill. With far-reaching views to Hay Bluff and the Black Mountains to the west, and the Malvern Hills to the east, this beautiful spot in Herefordshire, 'an isolated garret on the hill,' as Victoria quips, is open to the full force of the elements. When the wind whistles through some of her figurative willow sculptures dotted around the garden, it is as if it is breathing life into their inanimate forms.

Inside the barn, a menagerie of willow birdlife surrounds her, peeking out from behind benches or perched on ledges: owls, hens, geese, as well as wire dragonflies. 'They are wonderfully tactile pieces. It does help if you can get a feel for the work, and the willow takes on a lovely patina as it ages,' Victoria explains, as she teases, twists and knots pre-soaked and malleable withies (willow stems) onto the embryonic form of an owl. 'I enjoy making pieces that work in the environment >



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Victoria's barn workshop; she starts to build the form of an owl onto a welded steel armature; the pre-soaked willow is teased into twists and turns; some of the traditional tools of her craft



and the natural world,' she adds. 'They are inspired by the local wildlife I see around the cottage.'

Having graduated as a theatre design student in 1999, Victoria first used this flexible and lightweight material when making puppets and fantastical costumes for various theatre companies. 'I learned the basic willow-weaving techniques from puppet makers I worked alongside, and subsequently I've taught myself other basket-making skills,' she says.

It was while she was on a round-the-world trip with her partner, Graham, however, that Victoria was inspired to use willow weaving as an art form. 'I was influenced by the crafts of small rural communities, who were weaving functional and beautiful items with whatever was to hand. In Bolivia they were making things out of vines, in Malaysia palm trees, and in Brazil they were using plastic rubbish; it's amazing to see how creative people can be,' she continues. 'I was dying to use my willow-weaving skills to make things for myself, rather than working with a theatre design team or production company and being too constrained by other people's ideas - I wanted more creative free rein, and it's nice to be able to make whatever I choose.'

In the three years since taking this leap of faith, the style of Victoria's work has evolved, and she has added sculptural figures and abstract pieces to her crafting repertoire. 'It has been a steep learning curve,' she admits. 'The sculptures were quite blocky when I started, whereas now I achieve more fluid lines. I'm constantly developing new practices and new ways of doing things as the work dictates and requires. At Yorkshire Sculpture Park I was blown away by Sophie Ryder's creations. >



'I learned how to weld during my art studies,' Victoria explains. 'My pieces are tightly woven, and with their metal frames should last many years'

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT Victoria will first make rough sketches for a design; a Willow Reader sits lost in its book – ‘I use thicker willow for larger pieces and thinner for smaller,’ Victoria explains; a wise owl perches on a wooden block – prices for the sculptures range from £75 for an owl to around £300 for a small reader and in excess of £1,000 for larger figures; Handstand Boy blends in with the garden environment; Victoria makes finishing touches; wire and steel used for the sculptures **OPPOSITE** She retreats to the warmth of her cottage and completes a goose in front of her inglenook fireplace

She uses wire-like clay and it is so tactile. It made me think that I'd like to make some figurative pieces.’ Sculptures for both private and public commissions have included seated figures reading from books carved out of wood, children running or doing handstands, as well as giant willow cider apples or abstract balls. For the 2015 Chelsea Flower Show, she has been commissioned to produce a family of life-sized willow figures running through a woodland scene for Tale Valley Nursery, which is working alongside the Momentum charity that supports children diagnosed with cancer and their families. The sculptures are made from Black Maul willow grown in Somerset, which is soaked for five days to make it soft and pliable. They are formed around a welded armature made of mild steel, ‘which holds the integrity of the shape,’ Victoria explains. Using traditional and fairly rudimentary tools, she then wraps the willow around in circular motions with a scribble weaving technique – looping, twisting and interweaving to gradually build up the layers. ‘Working with a natural material, it doesn't always do what you want it to,’ she smiles. ‘It's unpredictable, and sometimes a piece will spring back and slap me in the face; I've had a few war wounds!’



Smaller pieces, such as an owl, will take Victoria a day to complete, whereas the larger figures can take more than a week. Once finished, the sculptures are coated with linseed oil to maintain their strength and lustre and protect them from Britain's inclement weather. Using a similar technique, she creates sculptures made from woven wire, too, which, like the willow, ages over time, galvanising from cool gunmetal grey to a warm russet brown. Through workshops, Victoria teaches people of all ages and abilities how to master the basics of her craft. ‘I do sometimes use live willow for these. The smell of it freshly cut is phenomenal and so evocative as it reminds me of my childhood home in Somerset, the willow-growing capital,’ she says. ‘There are so many possibilities when you're weaving, and many things you can weave into a willow piece – I find it very exciting.’

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