

## CHASE

## FEATURE

# Playful creative interventions

Rotherham Open Arts Renaissance (ROAR) chief executive SHARON GILL talks to artists Coralie Turpin and Jason Thomson

**YOU** may well have heard about Hope Fields at Thrybergh Country Park, a living memorial to honour both the victims of Covid-19 and those who fought the virus, which opened in March and is being developed by Rotherham Borough Council.

As well as being a haven for wildlife and the natural world, it includes different artistic elements from local sculptor and stone mason Dan Jones — a symbol of hope — and from Jason Thomson and Coralie Turpin — a range of playful creative interventions.

I have been aware of Jason and Coralie's work for many years as they make larger and larger public artworks you can stumble across in many different locations in Sheffield.

It was inevitable they would expand out to work in the wider region and you can now find their work in numerous locations throughout the Rotherham borough so it was time to find out what they're up to.

Based at Yorkshire Artspace — Persistence Works, they not only share their life but also a studio which has in itself impacted on the direction of their work. Coralie, who initially worked in textiles, recalled that it quickly became apparent this was not compatible with Jason's woodcarving activities which is partly responsible for Coralie's refocus on mosaics which you could argue she is currently best known for.

I am always interested in why people choose to follow their passion or interest and

become artists. Jason was always drawing from comics, and making things in clay or carving catapults from wood as a child. He enjoyed affecting the material world, and showed some promise of talent at a young age.

One profound memory comes from junior school when he had a piece of clay work fired in a kiln, which he sees as a transformative moment in his life. Another moment occurred when visiting a church that housed a carved Christ figure as a child. He witnessed his friend have a physical reaction to the sculpture and Jason recognised that objects had power.

Coralie remembers her childhood being full of drawing. There were always plenty of materials made available to her, most notably when she was ill and being visited by her nan. As a teenager Coralie completed her art GCSE independently from school and would buy fabric from the market on her way home on a Friday to knock up some unique fashions to wear out on the Saturday night. Fabric was so readily accessible once upon a time.

Neither Jason or Coralie come from families with artistic backgrounds, Jason is from a single parent family on benefits in Leicester where his mum was the school cleaner, and Coralie's dad was a train driver-cum-barber and her mum a barmaid at the local club in Widnes. They were supportive of their children's creative ambitions which is something important that I am learning from interviewing artists.

It was only a few weeks into their art degree studies in Sheffield when Coralie met Jason, and the rest is history!

As graduates, they would go art busking. Jason would pile up his tools and a woodcarving he was working on onto his bike and set out his work on a blanket in the city centre. This not only meant they could sell a few smaller items, but would start to get a profile as people recognised them, remembered them and talked about their work.

They quickly realised it was best not to rely on equipment, as it hampers movement and flexibility. If you need some heavy machinery, work with someone who has the equipment. They rely on hand tools and hand power tools for most of their fabrication, although Jason did admit to buying a bandsaw recently. The travelling light approach meant they could art busk in different places. They hitched up to the Edinburgh Festival, for example, and demonstrated carving and selling breeze block sculptures.



From this point forward, while they have distinctive styles and projects, they are influencing and helping with each other's work. They still bounce ideas off each other, which is evident in the way they talk about past commissions.

For over 10 years Coralie worked with the Sheffield Children's Festival, which brought a regular annual income, and the opportunity to work with over 30 schools each year, introducing different art techniques, including mosaics for outdoor projects. This is the start of Coralie's journey in art for the public realm. Schools began asking for more outdoor-

based projects through the festival, and at the same time Coralie was keeping up her personal creative practice, building a portfolio for exhibition.

Jason was developing the demonstration of his woodworking talents by attending different environmental and woodland-based public events, leading to the Parkway Man in 2013. You may have seen the figure as you drive into Sheffield on the A57.

Working collaboratively on a project in Thurnscoe, Jason and Coralie developed techniques in cast iron. It became clear to Jason while making this sculpture that the

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elements like a tipi willow shelter, and a carved stone and mud kitchen, referencing back to a settlement again.

The final piece the pair have collaborated on is a two metre long sculpture of a leaping hare in iron, symbolising spring and rebirth. This will be accompanied by four smaller cast animals for you to find.

Looking to the future, Jason is going to be working at Clifton Park with some young people looking at the environmental catastrophe of Ash dieback and how to use the wood creatively. He is also developing his skills carving miniature sculptures in wood and bone using his own hand made tools. keen to challenge his carving skills by attempting to carve Netsuke miniatures in bone, after the Japanese tradition, and to try his hand at making his own tools, and more reclamation projects and... and..

Coralie is excited to be working on artworks for new buildings in Sheffield and for a

private commission curated by the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, making a five metre tall stainless steel and mosaic artwork. She relishes the opportunity to work big and to consider the artistic integrity of the piece, as a change to working towards an externally generated brief or an architect's vision.

It really does seem that two heads are better than one in this instance.

Other works in Rotherham can be found at Ulley Country Park, Swinton's Richmond Estate, the Oak Archway at Centenary Park, Rotherham Hospital, Newman School, and Wickersley Comprehensive School.

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available wood was not going to provide the longevity required and so the figure was cast in iron. He branched out into metal, having the figure cast in iron. Lessons learned and knowledge gained by Jason or Coralie is then of benefit to the other, demonstrating a truly supportive and collaborative partnership.

They recall a fallow period where there was not a lot of work around, combined with some wider family challenges, and they struggled to get through. Being creatives, innovative and resilient, the couple looked to deliver a series of paid workshops or in studio classes for their bread and butter.

This element of their creative practice has served them well during the last year where lockdown has hit the cultural sector very hard. Coralie has adapted her approach and managed to deliver classes online, opening up their participants to a worldwide audience, including Mumbai.

With a little more time on their hands than expected, the couple started applying for lots of different commissions, and have been successful in many of their applications, which is keeping them very busy right now.

The projects that include community engagement work rely on a different skill set than artistic. We talked a little about how you learn to work with people from all walks of life. Jason recalls working with a mental health organisation with their clients, and how the conditions and necessary health and safety requirements led to learning a new technique, using a hammer punch on sheet metal, or metal repousse. It is a technique he is keen to develop further.

When their studios were at the Abbeydale Industrial Hamlet, there would be 300 people through the museum a day. A really good induction into working with the public. Coralie reflects that engaging in art and craft activities working with different groups is a very good thing for taking your mind of worries and allows people space to talk about problems or celebrations whether they have a shared trauma, or have faced difficulties in



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their life. The wealth and diversity of people's lived experiences, challenges your privilege has helped develop the artists' natural empathy-learned abilities which enriches their enjoyment.

One of those successful applications was to work on Hope Fields in Thrybergh. Memorial work is always sensitive, especially while we are still living with Covid and people we know are still grieving and suffering loss. Coralie and Jason have taken the restorative approach to their proposed works, to help transform the empty paddock into a place for families to spend meaningful time together outdoors in a beautiful space, and to be informal in their contributions.

Using a range of natural materials, they are making a curved bench from dry stone walling, inspired by the neolithic village at Skara Brae. I like the reference to prehistory here, and how we still remember those communities, and how that echoes with this new place that is being made to help us remember.

They are also making more playful

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