

6 Barbara Hepworth

Outside In Workshop Pack

As part of the Step Up training scheme for marginalised artists, several people took part in a research programme, to explore in detail a work in the collection at Pallant House Gallery with which they experienced some connection. Through guided and individual research, discussion groups and creating art in response to their findings, extensive materials were produced to form the basis of a series of workshop packs. These packs are a starting point for workshops delivered by Step Up artists under the umbrella of Outside In.

This pack was compiled from research by artist Suviwan Harvey who chose to focus on Barbara Hepworth's *Single Form (Nocturne)*, 1968.



Barbara Hepworth, *Single Form (Nocturne)*, 1968, Hussey Bequest Chichester District Council, © Bowness, Hepworth Estate

My experience of carving

I understand more about carving than I did when I started this project. It requires a different technique from modelling clay. For me, carving is like creating with what has been given, creativity within restriction, whereas modelling requires creativity in the broader sense - creating something from nothing - and one must use many techniques to achieve the desired result. Carving is taking off. Modelling is adding as much as removing. Moreover, with carving, any pieces that are mistakenly removed cannot be put back!

The act of removing by filing and sanding is a bit like meditation. I felt calm in my aim of achieving the results I had in mind. The process of carving trained me to persevere and be more patient. So, if I wanted my sculpted shape to be more rounded, I spent more time sanding. I could work on my piece at any time. I could come back and work on it regardless of my mood. I found carving an abstract piece was more fulfilling in that I could just let the shape of the stone decide for me and it could be anything. Overall it was an excellent experience for me.

The basic materials and safety precautions for carving stone or plaster block

1. Sandbag to support the stone whilst carving. This is a very good idea in order to prevent the stone from breaking.
2. Goggles or safety glasses for eye protection.
3. A dust mask is vital when grinding and carving stone so as not to inhale the dust.

Tools

1. Mallet
2. Chisel or screwdriver
3. Hand saw
4. Drill (to make a hole)
5. Files or riffler tools
6. Sand paper

Technique for carving soapstone or plaster

1. Use a pencil to outline the drawing of your form on the stone, never felt tip as the ink will spread to the stone or plaster block.
2. Hold the point of the chisel at about 45 degrees, never 90 degrees, carefully removing just a little at a time.
3. Use a riffler file to smooth out the marks and create the fine line detail.
4. Polish the finished stone carving with wax, or for plaster block use diluted PVA glue to seal the surface first. For stone, you can also use silicone sealer to seal the finish.



Suviwan in the workshop at Northbrook College, working on a soapstone carving



Some of Suviwan's carving tools: a mallet, screwdriver, files and riffler tools



Two of Suviwan's carved sculptures with the clay maquette of a seated figure that inspired them

Carving Soapstone

I first tried my hand at carving stone at Northbrook College, guided by technician David. He gave me soapstone about 1 inch thick. Soapstone is very soft and easy to work with so I did not need to use a mallet and chisel. Soapstone is made of talc, which is why the surface has a soapy feel. All I needed was a filing tool, a cutter or wood saw and a drill if I wanted to make a hole.

I looked at the stone's size and shape and then decided what I could achieve with it. I sketched the shape of my figure and drew on the stone. I then used my filing tools to shape my stone. To get rid of the scratches, I used sand paper (200 grit to 600 grit). I wetted my stone and rubbed the scratches off until they had all gone. I also used a knife to help remove the etched lines of sculpting marks. This took just under an hour. To make it shine, I rubbed baby oil into the stone, but I could also have used beeswax or shoe wax.

My first soapstone carving

I drew the shape I wanted with a pen. I used a handsaw to cut according to the shape. I used a drill to make a hole and finally, I smoothed the surface using wet sandpaper.



My second soapstone carving

With my second soapstone sculpture I made my figure form more realistic. I had a 3D plaster figure of a woman sitting crossed legged as a reference. The soapstone was thicker than the first piece. I used a wood saw and riffler to shape the stone. It took me three to four hours to get the form right and then another two to three hours to finish the piece off with buffing and sanding.

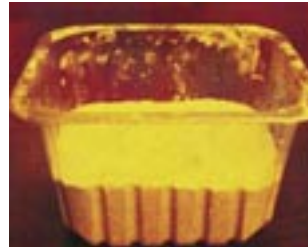
I was happy with the result as it came out as I had planned. With a very small piece of stone, the process took three to four hours to complete. As soapstone is so soft, small parts can accidentally be knocked off, meaning the outcome may need to be compromised.



Carving Plaster

My first plaster sculpture

I made a plaster block by mixing plaster, water and vermiculite, then left it in a plastic tub for an hour. I removed it before it dried completely. My intention with this piece was to simplify my figurative sculpture into an abstract form. First, I drew the form on all sides of the block. Influenced by the *Pierced Form* of Barbara Hepworth, I made a hole in the middle. I then carved the plaster block using just a mallet and screwdriver. To smooth the surface I sanded it with sandpaper and then sealed it with PVA glue diluted with water, then polished it with floor wax. My finished sculpture had the suggestion of a figurative form.



My second plaster sculpture

It was not as complicated as I expected to make an abstract form out of a plaster block. In abstract form, one has no reference to compare, no strict proportion, shape or form. So, for my next plaster block, I carved a more realistic form using a clay maquette I had made previously as a point of reference. This time, I mixed the plaster block from my three ingredients (plaster, water, vermiculite) in equal measure, but I felt that the plaster block was too grainy as it had too much vermiculite. I was pleased with the finished sculpture as it looked like my clay figure. I polished it with shoe wax.



My third plaster sculpture

I tried experimenting with making the plaster in different forms. I made the plaster and put it in a plastic bag, then put the bag into a small pot to form a more rounded shape. The proportion of the mixture was just about right. By using less vermiculite the plaster was soft enough to carve with just a mallet and screwdriver. I carved the torso in a rather abstract form, so I did not need to worry about the proportions of it.



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Biography

Barbara Jocelyn Hepworth was born in 1903 in Wakefield, Yorkshire. At the age of 16 she won a scholarship to Leeds School of Art where Henry Moore was a fellow student. Hepworth went on to study at the Royal College of Art in 1921, having won a county scholarship.

In 1925 Barbara Hepworth married British sculptor John Skeaping and in 1929 gave birth to a son, Paul. Two years later, Hepworth created *Pierced Form*, making a hole in an abstract sculpture to find a balance between form and space. This use of negative space was to become a trademark of her style. In 1931, Hepworth separated from Skeaping. That year, she met the abstract painter Ben Nicholson, (then married to Winifred Nicholson). Hepworth and Skeaping divorced in 1933 and in 1934 Hepworth gave birth to triplets. She and Nicholson married four years later.

Before the war began in 1939, Hepworth and her family moved to the Cornish fishing village of St Ives, where she stayed for the rest of her life. With a young family to raise, the time Hepworth was able to devote to carving was limited. In 1949, Hepworth purchased Trewyn Studio in St Ives, living there permanently from 1950 until her death. Here, she had the space and time to focus on her art. Under Nicholson's influence, her sculpture became more abstract and geometric, increasingly open and hollow. However, in 1951 she divorced again.

In the mid-1960s, Hepworth was diagnosed with cancer. She died at the age of 72, in a fire at her studio. The studio became the property of the nation and opened to the public as The Barbara Hepworth Museum in 1976.

Barbara Hepworth was one of the most outstanding British sculptors of the twentieth century. She was a woman artist in the 1930s, a time when there were very few women artists, let alone professional sculptors, as this had always been male-dominated territory. The sculpture that confirmed her reputation was her largest and most significant public commission, *Single Form* (1964), standing in front of the United Nations Headquarters in New York, created as a memorial to her friend Dag Hammarskjöld, the Secretary General of the UN who tragically died in 1961.



Hepworth carving in the Palais de Danse, 1961, photograph by Rosemary Mathews, © Bowness, Hepworth Estate



Hepworth with *The Cosdon Head*, 1949, photograph by Hans Wild, © Bowness, Hepworth Estate

Understanding *Single Form (Nocturne)*

I must admit that I know more about Henry Moore and his work than I do about Hepworth. I always mistakenly thought that the hole in the sculpture must have been Moore's idea, when in fact, it was Hepworth who first created a sculpture with a hole, her so-called *Pierced Form* which later became popular among abstract sculptors. Hepworth made the hole as a connection between different expressions of form.

Sometimes when I do not understand a work of art, I try to find a clue in its title or any description attached. However, the title *Single Form (Nocturne)* did not seem to tell me what this piece symbolised. I later found out that Hepworth liked to create sculptures consisting of a single upright form; a form that suggests a relationship with the human figure.



Barbara Hepworth, *Single Form (Nocturne)*, 1968, Hussey Bequest Chichester District Council, © Bowness, Hepworth Estate

My response to *Single Form (Nocturne)*

The sculpture is made of black Irish marble and sat beautifully on the space between the walls at the exhibition *Gods and Monsters: John Deakin's Portraits of British Artists* in 2010. I was intrigued by the fact that Hepworth was the only woman artist in that exhibition among all the famous male artists. Moreover, when I looked at the collection of art works in Pallant House Gallery, there were only a few women artists represented. One of the staff told me that the collections mostly came from the donations of collectors and in those days, people collected very few women's works due to many factors. This was not intended to be a feminist subject, but it was of personal interest as I am a female art student who was born into a male dominated society in South East Asia, so I am very interested to see how things have changed in the Western art world. It is probably very clichéd and outdated now to even mention gender issues in this country, as one of my male colleagues commented to me recently. However, as he also admitted, who is he to say that gender issues do not exist any more?

To learn that in 1900 it was not easy to be a woman artist, let alone a professional sculptor, yet Hepworth had achieved so much professionally, whilst at the same time raising a family of four young children, made me admire her even more. Looking at Hepworth's *Single Form (Nocturne)* for the first time, I would have thought that this could be a man's work as sculpture has always been associated with men because the nature of the job required strength and power. The piece displayed a sense of elegance and power. It is not only the shiny texture and rich colour of the marble combined with the curved shape, but also the hole in the centre, which makes the piece, in my opinion, peaceful and harmonious.



Barbara Hepworth, *Two Forms with White*, 1969, © Bowness, Hepworth Estate

Abstract Sculpture: Where did it all begin?

Hepworth's works from 1931 onwards were abstract sculptures consisting of a single upright form with piercing. Although she began sculpture in the realistic form of a human figure, she eventually transformed and simplified the figure into an abstract shape which is more to do with mass, surface, line and balance.

I had never done abstract sculpture before, but had been modelling clay sculptures for four months and I liked the feel of clay in my hands. My sculpture is realistic in form - I sculpt what I see. Hepworth however, worked in the opposite direction to what I had been taught in my life drawing class as I was always told to observe and look for the details, look twice before I draw. This is the realistic form of representation, but what Hepworth's works were all about is abstract. As Hepworth said,

"I rarely draw what I see - I draw what I feel in my body"

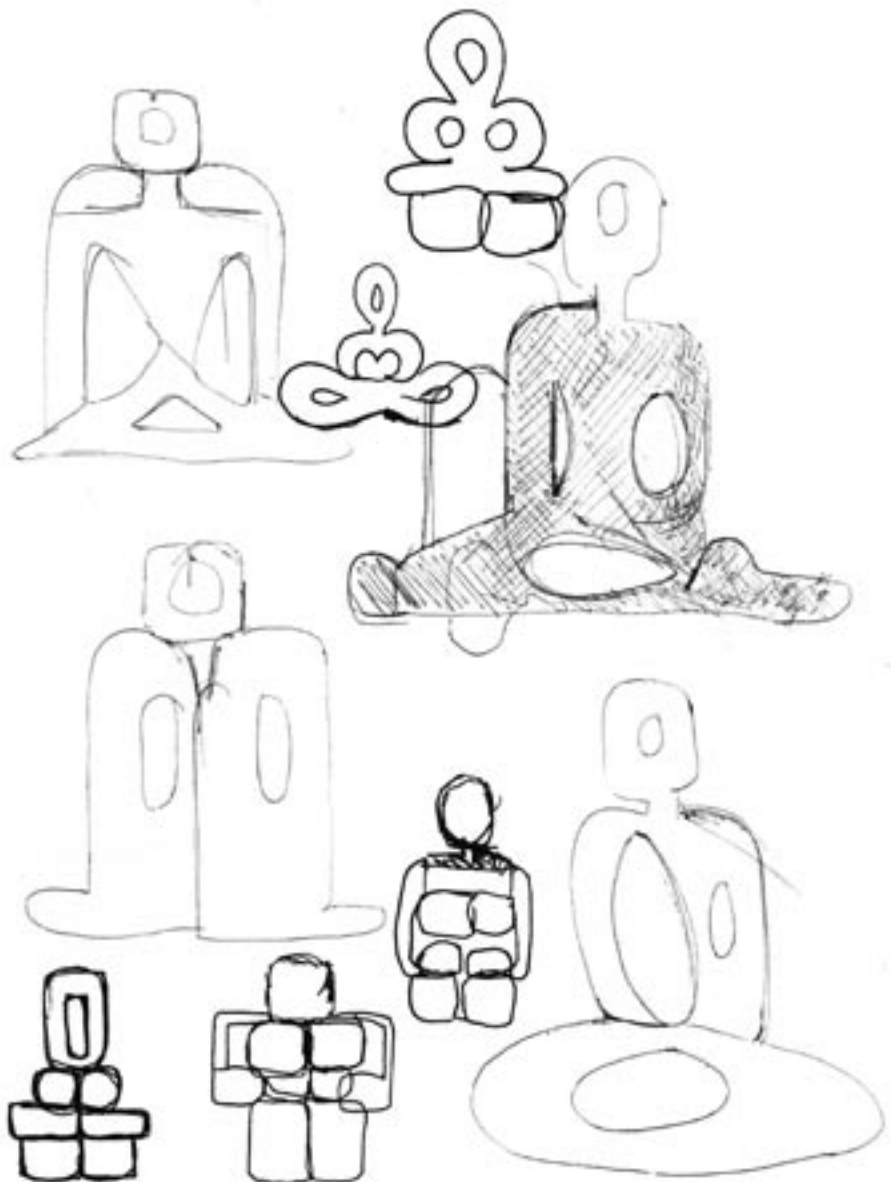
"So many ideas spring from an inside response to form: for example, if I see a woman carrying a child in her arms it is not so much what I see that affects me, but what I feel within my own body."

How do we transform what we see into an abstract shape?

Many times in the past when I looked at abstract art, my response to the work was that I could have done that too, what is so difficult about it?

The idea for Hepworth's abstract sculptures came from the landscape in Cornwall where she settled with her family. It was based on the way she saw a landscape, not as trees and hills, but as shape and colour.

To make abstract art, one needs to think differently and change the way we look at the world. Instead of seeing things with detail, look at them in terms of shapes and patterns - by looking from different angles: from a bird's eye view, or a frog's eye view, or by turning it upside down. Hepworth's figurative sculptures are a great example of how she simplified figures into abstract forms by changing the proportions of body parts, combining body parts or leaving them out altogether - no face, no legs for example. The finished sculpture would have a part which could be recognised as a figure.



Some of Suviwan's preparatory sketches

The Carving Process

Before embarking on this project, I had never carved stone before. When I started modelling clay, I found it was soothing and easy to manipulate into any shape. I could make changes as I went and mistakes could be put right before the firing process. I thought it would be interesting to find out about carving stone and compare it to clay.

Reading what Hepworth said about carving compared to modelling is interesting. In her words,

“Carving to me is more interesting than modelling, because there is an unlimited variety of materials from which to draw inspiration. Each material demands a particular treatment and there are an infinite number of subjects in life each to be re-created in a particular material. In fact, it would be possible to carve the same subject in a different stone each time, throughout life, without a repetition of form.”

At the beginning of December 2010, I went to a stone carving demonstration by sculptor Pauline Gluckman. She talked about how she was fascinated by stone, and said that stones would talk to her and give her a sense of how they wanted to be carved.

Pauline commented that the hardest stone to carve was granite, the second hardest was marble and then limestone. Alabaster was easy for beginners and a beautiful stone, soapstone, the softest of all, was also the cheapest.

I liked soapstone carving and found that sculpting made me focus on and be in tune with the subject. The carving process trained me to concentrate and pay greater attention to my work, because if I mistakenly removed some part of the sculpture, it could not be put back, unlike with modelling clay, and this stage might be crucial.



Suviwan Harvey, *Blue Figure*, 2011, chalk and acrylic paint



Suviwan Harvey, *Woman*, 2011, soapstone

