

Albion Fields

A WILD ENCOUNTER

Albion Fields isn't a sculpture-park or garden. It's more of a hike in the country with bonuses. Walk through woodland and, in a clearing, Adel Abdessemed's life-size white aluminium horse *Cheval de Turin* appears, kicking its back legs ferociously; emerge from the trees and Richard Long's 9-metre *Ivory Granite Line* stretches out in the rough grass; trudge up the side of a field, get your foot stuck in a rabbit hole, and land flat on your back at the base of James Capper's *Treadpad B*. Yes, that was me. And yes, the excitable dog that raced over to lick my right ear noisily as I lay in the mud made me feel even more ridiculous.

Rabbit holes aren't supposed to be part of the experience, unless you're not looking where you're going. But Albion Fields is supposed to be wild and unpredictable. As gallery owner Michael Hue-Williams explains, "The encounter with the sculpture is meant to be awkward and disorientating. There's no curatorial principle connecting the work, but we try to keep the arrangement sparse." The point is that the sculpture isn't laid out in an easy-to-access, continuous wave. You have to work for it. "That way, you might think you're heading towards Ryan Gander's *More really shiny things that don't mean anything*, far in the distance. But then you'll stumble across Vito Acconci's *Bad Dream House* hiding in the trees."

The landscape is one that Hue-Williams knows better than anyone because the fields have been in his family for generations. "My parents, grandparents and great-grandparents are buried in the churchyard next door. And I know that the woodland is precisely 56 years old, because it was planted for me when I was born. If you look on the Ordnance Survey map you'll see it has the name my parents gave it – Sprog's Wood."

The idea for Albion Fields developed during lockdown and, almost by accident, it's become the ideal way to see art. With 50 acres of land and a limit on visitor numbers, there's more fresh air and social distancing than any gallerist dare dream of. "We've collaborated with four London galleries: Goodman, Marian Goodman, Lisson and König Galerie. They know me. They trust me. I put on the first Ai Weiwei show in Britain. The galleries are sending lots of work and lots of visitors to us, and the public can come on Fridays and Saturdays, if they book. We've had people

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from all over – Dorset, Devon, Yorkshire. We're very international in the art that we show and I never work with dead artists. I like to be able to consult with artists, collaborate with them."

There's something performative about Albion Fields, with Hue-Williams acting as a slightly stern ringmaster. "We're a bit like a theatre – we put on a show and then it goes away again," he says. Even the local wildlife play cameo roles. "There's a pheasant which attacks a mirrored sculpture – every morning I find that it's dug up the grass again. And at the moment the pheasant is winning." I don't imagine the pheasant's war of attrition will last – Hue-Williams isn't the kind of man who gives up. "People think I'm a terrible risk-taker. I once sold my flat so I could buy a Cy Twombly painting." Part of the risk and ambition behind Albion Fields is getting the sculpture to rural Oxfordshire at all. I asked him what will happen if someone wants to buy Bernar Venet's *Indeterminate Line* – a massive scribble of knotted steel which soars six metres into the air and weighs over 10 tonnes. "Yes, it had to be made in a foundry in Hungary and shipped over in sections. But if I sell it in the UK, I'll simply helicopter it out in one giant piece."

Not everything is shinier, showier, heavier at Albion Fields. One of my favourite pieces is David Adjaye's quiet, contemplative *Horizon Pavilion*. Its dark, wooden slats allow bars of light to slip inside, whilst preserving stripes of soothing shadow. The angled structure is set into the landscape to suck in a cooling breeze. Stand inside it and you'll feel your lungs expand as the air moves through. It's both statuesque and understated, impressive yet unpretentious. There's so much at Albion Fields that's supercharged – particularly Erwin Wurm's aluminium *Fat Convertible*, an inflated, Billy Bunter of a sports car – and there's no doubt that the project has taken monumental ambition to pull off: splitting highly complex structures into scores of pieces and transporting them thousands of miles, reconstructing them onsite, and reinforcing the ground to stop huge slabs of stone sinking into the earth. Yet now that it's all in place, it's as if the sculpture has been there all along. Until it comes to the end of its theatrical run, of course, and new performers arrive.

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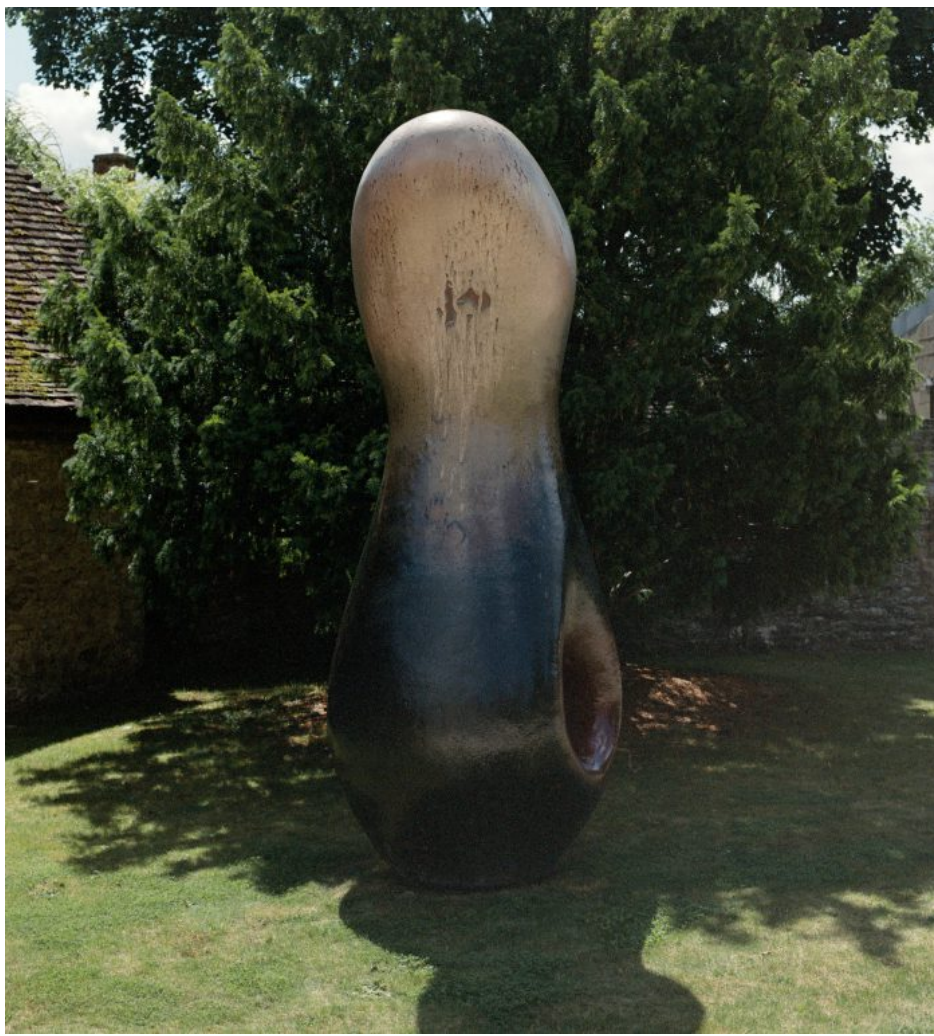
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