



Julia Vance's *HOLD* in Holland Park



The Language of Sculpture

Norwegian sculptor and contemporary artist Julia Vance explores the power of words through her latest installation in Holland Park. *ELIZABETH FINNEY* reports



AGAINST THE SOFT
leafy backdrop of Napoleon Garden in Holland Park, Julia Vance's white Carrara marble sculpture, *HOLD*, asserts a notion of solemn permanence, and the shadows cast by the surrounding trees complement its dappled surface. Completed in 2013 and originally exhibited in front of the Norwegian Parliament, Vance's work certainly suits its newest surroundings.

Vance's artistic oeuvre is creating "sculpturally minimalistic poetry" out of letters and words. Through her sculptures, she creates a soothing place to pause, to feel the innate meaning of words free from the superfluous and often arbitrary way they are bandied around in everyday speech. Vance says calmly: "We are surrounded by so much information and overstimulation. I seek to take away all the excess, all the too muchness, and narrow it down to basic words which may even seem simple." Her masterpiece *HOLD* is made up of the sweeping curvatures of the letters H, L and D; you can curl up inside the sculpture's cavity and give it tangible meaning by becoming the missing letter O. You are held by the marble and by the sculpture

Having started her creative journey in calligraphy, an intense understanding of the visual form of language is crucial for Vance, and she successfully lifts the written word off the page to carve it into reality and volume. Her work is both interactive and onomatopoeic, encouraging her audience to question the true definition of words. "Usually we think of words written on a flat surface, but I found myself wanting to make the word touchable. I was curious at looking under, behind and through these figures we call letters."

HOLD, like many of Vance's other sculptures, was made in Studio Sem, where she has worked sporadically over the last nine years. Situated in Pietrasanta at the base of the marble mountains of Tuscany, the studio has accommodated renowned sculptors such as Henry Moore and Damien Hirst, making it a powerhouse of modern sculpture. Smiling pensively, Vance says, "I think it's interesting that marble is a classical material but it can be worked in a contemporary way."

For Vance, being humble in her work is key. "I've worked over 20 years with stone. It is a slow material, receptive and definite, and you need to mature with it. I really need to know how to push stone and also other materials to their limits."

From utilising materials for expression, such as glass to illustrate a lack of physical place in *SPACE* or silver for the exquisite *love-die*, Vance has taken her drive for layers and depth further, by focusing on the unseen inside of her sculptures rather than their outward



appearance. A piece currently on show in Tuscany, entitled *HER(E)*, features two hand-sized holes in a block of alabaster, which viewers are encouraged to interlock their fingers through and literally read the sculpture with their hands.

Part of the magic of her work is that no matter what theme and word she's working with, you don't need to be able to read it to understand the meaning. "I materialize a thought. My sculptures are a thought in 3D to encourage reflection on two levels; on form and content and the relation between them." Her fascination with words is intriguing, and she adds enthusiastically: "It is enriching to work with form and volume alongside language, speaking to both the eye, the hand and the mind."

HOLD means the same in two of Vance's three fluent languages, Norwegian and English, making it one of her most significant and personal installations. Vance talks of growing up bilingually and constantly switching between languages. "You don't need a passport to talk different languages," she says, adding "language is a freedom."

Expressing an appreciation for the London environment and a connection with the sculptural tradition of England, Vance says, "I admire that London has so many fantastically large parks. They become an enlargement of people's living room, a place to meet and to be." Aside from her work in Italy and Norway, Vance speaks on a panel debate in London about Scandinavian artists, and will run several workshops with local schools in the autumn.

This is the fourth year of a collaboration between the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and the Royal British Society of Sculptors celebrating the work of female sculptors. *HOLD* was unveiled in the Napoleon Gardens, Holland Park, on 20 May, where it will remain until 2 November, after which Vance hopes to find it a permanent home in England. ■

The sculpture HOLD is in the Napoleon Garden, Holland Park
juliavance.no

*Clockwise from top: HOLD with person inside;
 Julia Vance carving in Studio Sem; WE-ME (steel);
 Vance carving inside HOLD*
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