

# Hard matters

EMILY TOBIN looks at the work of three sculptors who create pieces from stone and its composites

Heavy, unyielding and often impenetrable, stone does not lend itself to being easily worked, and yet sculptors gravitate towards this temperamental material. Perhaps it is the allure of a challenge, or its timelessness, monumentality and permanence. Whatever the appeal, there is a certain lyricism with which sculptors talk about stone. Michelangelo declared that 'every block has a statue inside it and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it', while Barbara Hepworth loved marble for 'its radiance in the light, its hardness, precision and response to the sun'. Remarkably, sculptors working today are still able to coax out new and imaginative forms from this material, creating works that are tactile, aesthetic and that bridge the gap between art and nature.

## BEN GASKELL

Ben Gaskell's handsome hard-stone pieces are deceptively simple. Exquisitely finished but, as he says, 'not decorated or fussed over', their modesty of form belies a long and messy process of 'scratching, bashing and polishing'. Though they vary in shape and size, his works tend towards slick cubes and rhomboids; on first glance, they are solid, impenetrable blocks, but on closer inspection they are cleft in two by a fissure that slices across the stone. Ben spent 10 years as a trader in raw rock crystal, so is well acquainted with the 'gem-trading entrepôts of the world' and knows where to find his favoured agate, porphyries and black Swedish dolerite - which he chooses because they are 'hard, durable and structurally competent'. Though he is not formally trained, Ben has spent 'thousands of hours' working on the restoration, repair or copying of antique hard-stone objects, and this, rather than college, has given him 'the best and most stubbornly realistic' discipline to teach him his trade. *Prices start at £10,000; adriansassoon.com*



## HILDA HELLSTRÖM

Hilda Hellström works in Welsh anthracite and Jesmonite; the latter, strictly speaking, is a composite, though it shares many of the same qualities as stone. Hilda's classically proportioned urns seem to contain entire universes in their surface - undulating coloured strata form swirling shades of midnight blue, cut through with turquoise, pink and sometimes red. The effect is rather like looking at a mythical landscape from a stratospheric height. 'There is this idea that stone is a rigid material,' says Hilda, 'but, like everything else, it is in constant movement, yet at a much slower pace - and that's what intrigues me.' Hilda trained at the Royal College of Art in London, but has since returned to her native Sweden, where she now works from a converted ceramics factory. *Prices start at £800; hildahellstrom.se* □

FROM TOP Almuth Tebbenhoff, *In One Hundred Light Years Turn Left*, 60cm diameter, marble. Hilda Hellström, *Sedimentation Urn*, 43 x 17cm diameter, Jesmonite. Ben Gaskell, *Box carved from Egyptian Red Porphyry*, 8.5 x 9.4 x 9.7cm



## ALMUTH TEBBENHOFF

Eduardo Paolozzi spotted the work of Almuth Tebbenhoff in the late Seventies. He was so impressed by her pots and surreal sculptures that he invited her to unofficially use the facilities at the Royal College of Art, which, says Almuth, 'opened everything up for me. It was there I learnt to question my own choices and decisions'.

Almuth had previously shied away from stone - 'it was too hard, too heavy, too dense and too difficult'. But, following a scholarship in Pietrasanta in Italy, where she was taught how to carve marble by master craftsmen, she fell in love with the process. While some artists relish the weight of stone, Almuth concedes that she has always fought with the material and yet, miraculously, she brings a certain lightness to her sculptures. She does her marble work in Italy, right at the source, where the harsh, bright sunlight shows up every bump and unintended unevenness, and so much the better, for her work invites you to savour every smooth surface and clean line. *Prices start at around £4,000; tebbenhoff.org*