

Pictures by Keith Heppell



Art & Soul

Ahead of her “most important” solo show to date – *Tree of Life*, which opens at Ely Cathedral this month – sculptor Helaine Blumenfeld tells Alice Ryan about finding and following her calling

It's late at night and jazz is playing in Helaine Blumenfeld's studio. The sculptor is at work, hands kneading, pushing, pulling and teasing a block of clay, eyes half-closed.

“To start with I just work the clay, not by seeing, but by feeling. I draw on my dreams, I draw on my traumas. You have to go deep beyond the surface. That's where you find your individuality; where you find your truth.”

With works in museum collections and public spaces around the world – from a Milwaukee square to London's Hyde Park – Helaine is among Britain's most esteemed sculptors.

Though she's been hailed as heir to both Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth, the American is famous not for following in others' footsteps, but rather for forging her own path: variously cast in bronze and carved from marble, her finished pieces have a signature style, dubbed by art critics ‘genre Blumenfeld’.

About to unveil a solo show at Ely Cathedral, *Tree of Life*, Helaine says it will be her “most important” to date. “Ever since we came to Cambridge in 1970, we've been visiting Ely Cathedral. It's our cathedral: there's a real connection there. It's a spiritual building and my sculptures are spiritual.”

Curated by visual arts adviser Jacqueline Cresswell, the exhibition will see Helaine's works – some of them many metres tall – installed both within and without the cathedral. It promises to be an arresting event.

Born in Long Island (“only a block away from Trump, though I don't know if I should admit that. . .”), Helaine's father was a builder from Albany, himself one of seven,



while her mother was the highly educated daughter of emigrant Russian Jews.

A piano prodigy, at 11 Helaine set her heart on playing jazz professionally, “but I couldn't quite get the balance right between the formal classical training and the freedom of jazz. “A lot of my work is musical, though. And I always have jazz or classical music playing in the studio.”

Comparing the tensions between freewheeling jazz and orderly classical compositions to the relationship between Cycladic and Archaic art – one, dating as far back as the 3000s

BC, is “almost reductive” in its clean-lined minimalism; the other, beginning in the 7th Century BC, is “almost decorative” in its representational style – Helaine says the two collide in her sculpture.

Her work is, in many ways, an exploration of life's polarities: light and dark, order and disorder, pleasure and pain, despair and hope. “I'm pulled in different directions.”

Ferociously bright as well as independent, young Helaine tore through her school years and won a university place, to study philosophy, aged just 16. Her academic career continued until she met her writer husband Yorick in a New York bookstore, mid-way through her PhD. Taking an expensive tome of John Locke's philosophical essays to the counter, Helaine was halted by Yorick, “who told me ‘Never buy books here. All you're paying for is the bindings. There's a place on 4th Avenue where you'll get it much cheaper’. He was working in the store at the time, so that got him fired. . .”

It was Yorick's father, acclaimed German



photographer Erwin Blumenfeld, that changed Helaine's perspective on academic study: "Even though his son was at Harvard, he thought it was a waste of time and money. I was very influenced, both by the beauty of his work and the power of his personality."

By the early 1960s, Helaine and Yorick had decided to move to New Zealand and establish a Utopian community. Meeting in Italy to interview prospective members, they went to the National Gallery in Naples, "and that's when I was first confronted by Cycladic sculpture, very often a study of a single feature – maybe a hand or an eye.

"I'd been searching for a vocabulary to express dreams and suddenly I felt I had found it. I had this enormous sense of conviction that this was what I wanted to do; this was the way to express those things that are beyond language."

When Yorick's visa application was rejected – it coincided with the Cuban missile crisis and the authorities were, says Helaine, "suspicious" of the community concept – the couple settled instead in Paris. Buying her first block of clay, Helaine set to work in the kitchen of their two-room flat, "and the first things I did I thought were brilliant".

Those pieces won her a place at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, where she went on to study with famous Russian-born artist Ossip Zadkine. When her first tutor, unimpressed by her abstract approach, suggested she quit, Zadkine spotted her pieces on a studio shelf and said "I love that work. Send the young man to me" – he had no idea I was a woman, of



course".

Following her debut exhibition in Vienna, Helaine's sculptures caught the eye of influential gallerist Alex Rosenberg, who then represented Henry Moore; known for his monumental pieces in both bronze and marble, Moore was reluctant for Rosenberg to show another sculptor working both on his preferred scale and in his preferred media.

Then, the year before he died, Moore agreed to a joint exhibition, picking Helaine's portfolio from a proffered shortlist. "Alex called to say 'I'd like you to do a show with another artist'. Even then I didn't like the idea of group shows, but he said 'Wait, you haven't heard who the other artist is: it's Henry Moore'. So that changed my mind."

Credited as the father of Modernist sculpture in Britain, Moore "was a lovely man, more Yorkshire than artist, in many ways. He didn't have that famous artistic temperament; he was very calm."

Since that 1985 showcase, Helaine has been commissioned to make works of public art the world over. A favourite is her first, a group of five pieces, known affectionately as 'the family', in Milwaukee. Installed in a federally-owned plaza, when the land later changed hands a move was made to sell the work. When it appeared on eBay, there was uproar, "and eventually it was decided the piece belonged to the city itself. It actually saw a change in the law in America: that if a piece of public art is site-specific, it can't just be moved."



The maquette for 'the family' still stands in Helaine's home studio. A glass-walled room that adjoins the wonderfully wild garden of her Grantchester home – the home she's shared with Yorick for almost 50 years, where they raised sons Remy and Jared – this is where the clays are made, the best of which are then cast in plaster and tool-refined, before being painstakingly scaled up into either marble or bronze.

For decades, Helaine has split her time between Grantchester and Pietrasanta in Tuscany, source of the world's purest marble and former workplace of Michaelangelo. Though she used to complete the whole process single-handed, from rough-cutting to finishing, Helaine is now assisted with her larger works by two artisans, collaborators over many years.

Moulding a piece of clay for up to 20 hours before looking at it critically, it's at





this point that Helaine decides whether to pursue or abandon a piece. “Sometimes it’s just not working. So you start again.”

Her latest works, part of her ongoing Tree of Life series, are responses to the external, rather than internal, world. “It used to be very personal, drawing on what I felt within myself. Now I’m drawing on what I see around me: the chaos and pain of the world we’re living in.” The plight of the world’s refugees is a particular preoccupation: “Exodus is a theme I come back to, time and again.”

The ‘trees’ begin with twisting, turning, contorting trunks, which gradually unfurl into sky-reaching ‘leaves’. One, titled Encounter, has three strands in its trunk, explains Helaine, each representing a different religion: Christianity, Judaism and Islam. As they twine together, there seems, from some angles, no hope for

reconciliation; at the top of the tree, the three either unfurl into a glorious flower or implode into thin air, depending on your perspective.

The power of sculpture to connect people both to places and each other is something Helaine treasures. The fact The Chauvinist, her work on Cambridge’s Hills Road, is a common meeting place, and Flame, outside Clare Hall, is used as a landmark, pleases her immensely: “If you put a sculpture in a place, it gives people a sense of ownership, which I think is wonderful.”

“Exhibiting in a public space, like the

cathedral, is such an inspiring experience,” Helaine continues. “People from every background – every profession, every culture, every country – can interact with the work.

“I love to watch people’s reactions. You see them put their hands to their chests or hear them take a breath. . . . Sculpture connects more quickly than any words.”

Tree of Life runs at Ely Cathedral from July 13 to October 28. Entry is included with the usual admission fee – see elycathedral.org for more.