

## Tremenheere Sculpture Gardens: Collaborating with Nature

by Elizabeth Fullerton

In a 1972 *Artforum* essay, Robert Smithson observed that “when a finished work of 20th-century sculpture is placed in an 18th-century garden, it is absorbed by the ideal representation of the past, thus reinforcing political and social values that are no longer with us.” Sculpture lovers, particularly in England, have become accustomed to seeing contemporary works in this way, installed within the ornately landscaped grounds of stately homes such as Blenheim Palace and Houghton Hall, both built in the 18th century. Redolent with the power of the landed class, these settings establish a context of juxtaposition, but Tremenneere Sculpture Gardens,

located in a remote part of Cornwall, offers a different model, presenting art and nature in harmony—an approach that Smithson would surely have approved.

Tremenheere constitutes a standalone garden, unattached to a grand house, which liberates it from the burden of history and privilege. Owners Neil Armstrong and his wife Jane Martin, both medical practitioners, purchased 10 acres of prime south-facing land (since expanded to 22) in 1997. A passionate gardener, Armstrong spent seven years clearing fallen

trees and shrubbery, but unlike 18th-century landscape designers, he did not seek to dominate nature. His vision is informed by the idea that “planting, landscape, and art all have to work with each other.” Over the years, Armstrong has nurtured a sensory wonderland filled with glorious plant life and meditative installations by international artists such as James Turrell, Richard Long, Kishio Suga, and David Nash, alongside works by local artists such as Penny Saunders, Ken Gill, and Billy Wynter. In *Thinking the Sculpture Garden:*



*Art, Plant, Landscape* (Routledge, 2020), Penny Florence, professor emerita at the Slade School of Fine Art, suggests that Tremenneere is “a hybrid artwork in itself.” She draws a distinction between it and the usual approach to sculpture gardens: “Few of us experience them as articulating a further reaching philosophy that helps us to think about what it is to be human.”

It requires something of a pilgrimage to reach Tremenneere—almost double the time by train from London than from

London to Paris. (The comparison is fitting, given that a historic pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela in Spain traverses the land.) Tremenneere’s remoteness is part of its magic, as is its magnificent position overlooking St Michael’s Mount, an island formerly inhabited by monks and crowned by a medieval castle, with the shimmering Atlantic beyond. Tremenneere enjoys good soil, a mild microclimate, and a mature woodland, all of which allow subtropical plants to flourish. “The purpose is to create an Arcadian

place where you're transported from everyday worries and concerns. It's trying to create an exterior space where one can lose oneself," Armstrong explains. "The Japanese were totally aware that a woodland walk is enormously restorative. The detail is not as important as the overall atmosphere and soul of the garden."

Any discussion of the artworks at Tremenheere should begin with James Turrell, who created the garden's first permanent installation. Armstrong met the Light and Space artist in 1998, when Turrell was scouting for a place to observe the 1999 eclipse. He built a temporary *Skyspace* at Tremenheere and then proposed a permanent version. "His philosophy is very much part of what I've been trying to do at Tremenheere," says Armstrong. "Something that reaches a deeper psychological interaction." *Tewlowlow Kernow* (2012), Cornish for "Twilight in Cornwall," is an impressive elliptical domed chamber designed to capture the extraordinary array of hues at dusk. It's a mesmerizing experience to watch the changing patterns of clouds and vapor trails overhead.

*Aqua Oscura* (2013), perhaps the most dramatic work in the entire garden, is situated in an underground water tank. Over dinner before the eclipse, Armstrong mentioned this tank. As he retells it, "After a long pause, Turrell said, 'I know. I've been in your tank.'" Turrell had discovered a manhole in the dense undergrowth, removed the lid, and descended the metal steps mounted on the wall



into pitch darkness. The installation, which took about nine years to realize, is transformative. After entering a shed-like space, visitors circumnavigate a wall that blocks the light and plunges everything into blackness, feeling their way along a narrow, claustrophobic corridor. Finally one emerges into a dim room and becomes slowly aware of a spectral monochrome image of branches and foliage moving on the far wall. Like an apparition, this vision appears out of nowhere, with no context or explanation. (It is created by a pinhole camera projected above a false ceiling.) It takes about 12 minutes to see 95 percent of the scene, according to Armstrong, and then a further hour to see the remaining five percent. I had assumed the perceptual process was a result of the eyes acclimatizing, but the doctor explained that the adjustment happens in the brain: "The images haven't suddenly come. They are there all the time, but until your brain is awoken you can't appreciate it. So, it is an exercise in perception rather than

visuals. As the nerve pathways become alive, it's a journey in experiencing the artwork. It happens not gradually but in a series of staccato, glitchy bits of progress forward." The sheer range of emotions awakened in this space—from anxiety to dread, to calm, to euphoria—is enthralling.



OPPOSITE:  
**JAMES TURRELL**  
*Tewlowlow Kernow*,  
2012.  
Site-specific installation,  
49 x 33 ft.

THIS PAGE,  
FROM TOP:  
View of Tremenheere  
Sculpture Gardens,  
Cornwall, U.K.

**KISHIO SUGA**  
*Untitled*,  
2001/17.  
Larch logs, 13 ft. long.



A similarly contemplative vein underlies Kishio Suga's *Untitled* (2001), one of two works at Tremeneere by the artist. Up a meandering path past a shady pond, a clearing reveals 11 upright logs of identical height and girth. They appear to stand in straight formation, but some are subtly offset so that the incised line running along their tops continues uninterrupted. The sixth, central log bears a flurry of incisions across its surface. Armstrong suggests, "It could represent your journey through life, with big steps, small steps, some wobbles, a mid-life crisis. All of life is there in the most simple, reduced way possible." Suga speaks of his approach to things as "an ongoing investigation of 'situation' and the 'activation of existence'"; his focus is as much on the interdependency of elements and the surrounding space as on materials. "Sometimes I think about how to introduce a completely different order that would stimulate the viewer's ways of looking and thinking about things to the point where they perceive another world altogether," he explains in a 2015 essay. "In these cases, there is no need to use materials and spaces with strange shapes or anything extreme about them. I give the work a typical appearance but add some external elements. It is like altering a key so that it no longer fits the keyhole."

Suga's presence at Tremeneere was the result of a tour organized by a curator friend. Armstrong does not go out looking for prospective artists; the pairings tend

to happen serendipitously. The key is collaboration between artist and owner. Richard Long's participation was his ex-wife's idea. Initially offered an area with a curved wall, he preferred a grander location with a feeling of space. In the end, they agreed on a hilltop meadow with stunning views. Armstrong dissuaded Long from working with meadow flowers, which would be difficult to maintain. Instead, *Tremeneere Line* (2013) consists of a long straight strip of waving grasses—Long's only living sculpture. Elegant in its simplicity, it invites visitors to cast an eye across the woodland and bay.

Armstrong seems to favor the open-endedness of abstraction. Only one work at Tremeneere is clearly figurative, a brooding minotaur's head by Tim Shaw. Many of the works share a sensibility that transcends nationality or artistic approach. The Suga, Turrell, and Long installations, with their philosophical orientation, sit comfortably with David Nash's anthropomorphic gathering of blackened oak forms and Peter Randall-Page's *Slip of the Lip* (2016), which evokes botanical forms. Though these works invite reflection, they also inspire curiosity and a kind of open inquiry in keeping with the quietly playful spirit at Tremeneere.

This aspect of the garden comes to the fore in Richard Woods's cartoonishly diminutive yellow *Holiday Home*, Amy Cooper's armchair made from bricks, Michael Chaikin's colorful Perspex wind sculptures, and Tom Leaper's pleasingly incongruous foam

and fiberglass *Agent Orange*. Penny Saunders's beguiling *Restless Temple* (2015), with its hollow trompe l'oeil columns made of cedar skin, recalls a Neoclassical façade, but it sways and shivers in the wind, emphasizing the fragility of civilization. It took about 15 years and several engineers to make the work viable. A core of tensioned steel runs through the temple down to counterweights at its base. Saunders, whose background is in theater, was inspired by Greek philosophy and the double-edged nature of human progress. "I think we're going to pieces because we've become too clever. That's why the temple is blowing in the wind," she says. Like a possessed stage prop straining to pull free of its moorings, *Restless Temple* stands as a monument to hubris.

The newest work slated for Tremenheere is a large-scale galvanized steel installation by the artist duo ATOI, whose practice explores interconnections between geological formations and anthropological tension and release.  *Holding Breath*  consists of two parallel louvered slat walls (13 feet high by 59 feet long), with a fractured triangular middle section that juts out like a geological fault. "It looks like a big wall, but it also has a gesture of relief, this opening in the form," says Amy Thomas-Irvine, who with her partner Oliver makes up ATOI. "It was originally supposed to be solid; but it needed to breathe, so it became this louvered structure that the wind can pass through." The installation's foundations have been laid in a dynamic position pointing downhill toward St Michael's Mount.

ATOI's Oliver Thomas-Irvine says of Tremenheere's creator, "I appreciate the way he curates the land and how he considers the plants in relation to the work. It's made to feel natural and not like the works are just stuck there." Armstrong reminds me of a passionate amateur 19th-century naturalist. Often but not always from the leisure class, these Victorians made huge contributions to their fields before science became professionalized and compartmentalized into rigid disciplines. Such amateurs have long inspired artist Mark Dion. "I'm always attracted to those people, and I'm also attracted to how citizen science is promoted in Britain now. It's like going back to the origins of

scientific investigation, and in all of this stuff, art and science are very closely knit," he told me. Tremenheere, with its equal emphasis on plants, landscape, and art, offers a new way to experience a sculpture garden—one that requires humility, respect, and openness. As Penny Florence notes, working with plantings implies change and instability, demanding collaboration with forces greater than the human psyche: "Thinking about art in this way is potentially revelatory. If we see ourselves as part of the same life forces as the garden and the landscape, a number of new possibilities open up. We are, after all, art, plants, landscape, humans, at the most basic level, matter. Carbon." ■



OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM:

**SAMUEL BASSETT**  
*Lost Karensa*,  
2015.

Solid concrete with incised lettering, 90 x 70 cm diameter.

**PENNY SAUNDERS**  
*Restless Temple*,  
2015.

Cedar strips and skin, and steel, platform: 20 x 25 ft.; 23 ft. high.

**RICHARD LONG**  
*Tremenheere Line*,  
2013.

South African resto grass and Boloskion Tetraphyllum, 131 ft. long.

THIS PAGE:  
View of Tremenheere Sculpture Gardens, Cornwall, U.K.