

FINANCIAL TIMES

From spiders to the sublime, art disrupts an Arcadian landscape

Compton Verney, an English manor with a Capability Brown garden, hosts a range of works that fire the imagination



Compton Verney's 'Sculpture in the Park' show includes this spider sculpture by Louise Bourgeois © Jamie Woodley/Compton Verney/The Easton Foundation/DACS, London

Jane Owen MARCH 21 2024

The garden-visiting season launches at Easter, but a single-stop treasure chest of and inspiration for Arcadias big and small can be found at Compton Verney, the gallery and Capability Brown-designed park, 10 miles from Shakespeare's birthplace in the UK's Midlands.

The gallery is celebrating its 20th anniversary with several new exhibitions packed with ideas from the sublime to the ridiculously lovely. Abby Viner, director of creative programme, gave me a tour as works were being installed on a freezing afternoon before the exhibition opened.

Inside the gallery, *Landscape and Imagination, from Gardens to Land Art*, curated by Professor Christiana Payne, is an elegant, thoughtful tour of the place of landscape and gardens in our cultural memory. Using paintings, drawings and sculpture, it speaks to Compton Verney's landscape, as well as gardens around the world and Arcadian disrupters such as Ian Hamilton Finlay, whose clever, teasing sculptures play and pun with ideas from classicism, fine art and war.

In one of his works, five stone finials morph from a globe through to a classic pineapple and then a grenade — the last a reminder of the late poet/artist's landscape Little Sparta, in Lanarkshire, where two pillars are topped with larger-than-life stone grenades.

Another Hamilton Finlay piece is his 1982 slate plaque "Woodland is Pleasing to the Muses", an idealised landscape with a military tank manoeuvring through the trees. Gardens need jokes, dark or otherwise. They lift the soul when slugs have destroyed the heritage carrots.



'Perceval' by Sarah Lucas, a full-size, five-tonne painted bronze Clydesdale horse and cart © Jamie Woodley

Those in search of more sober garden ideas should head to the mid-18th century picture showing the women's quarters of a Mughal palace with clipped trees shading a formal garden of square beds. A fountain plays at their centre, while the women picnic in the foreground. Almost exactly contemporary is Canaletto's famous *The Grand Walk, Vauxhall Gardens*, (c1751) where more earthy pleasures were enjoyed by men and women in pavilions, tents and promenades.

Balthasar Nebot's 1738 painting of gardeners toiling over monumental hedging at Hartwell House just outside London is a reminder that well-executed garden structure is worth the effort. Likewise, displayed sketches and designs by Brown and his contemporaries illuminate the genius of a well-planned landscape garden. These are contrasted with the late Charles Jencks's visualisation methods, which include Plasticine models: anything and everything to get the picture right.

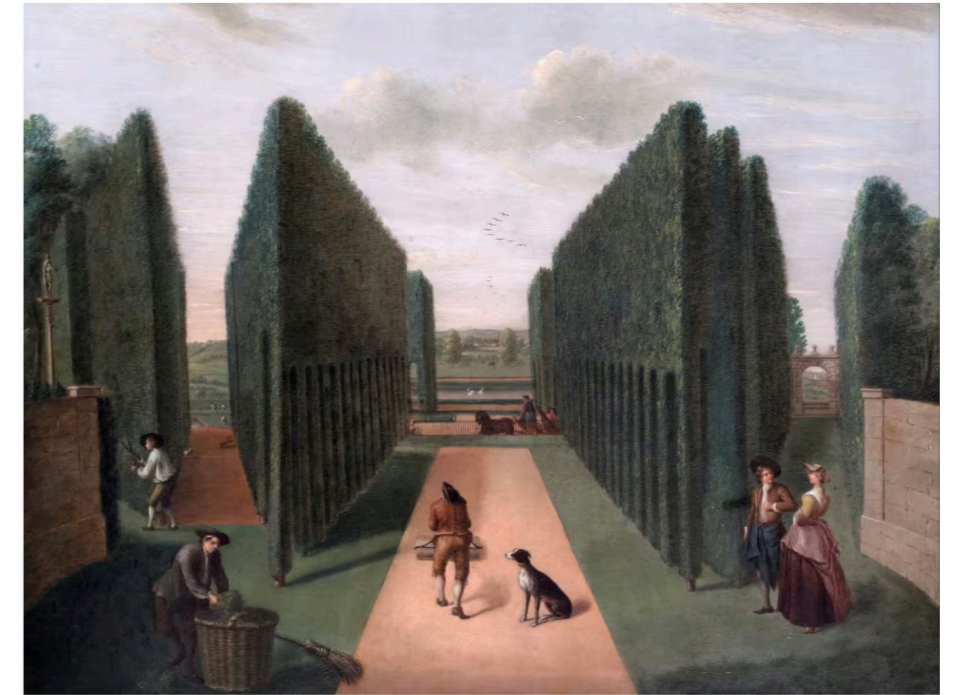
Gardens need jokes, dark or otherwise. They lift the soul when slugs have destroyed the heritage carrots

Outside the main visitor entrance, sculpture comes into its own with Helen Chadwick's enamelled white bronze "Piss Flowers", created from the shapes made by the artist and her partner urinating into snow in the 1990s. It speaks to one of several themes for the new *Sculpture in the Park* exhibition.

At the back entrance to the house, London-based French artist Nicolas Deshayes' cast-

aluminium fountains appear over the subterranean remains of Compton Verney's formal water garden. His gut-like pieces "spit, rummage, piss and ejaculate, [seeming] to celebrate the fertility of aquatic and subterranean worlds", according to Compton Verney's description.

Inside Compton Verney house, the Folk Art gallery includes a hilarious picture called "City Foulers Mark" with man and dog squatting, St Paul's Cathedral in the distant background. And there's a further scatological flourish in the form of Augustas Serapinas, whose sinuous wooden "fence", referencing Compton Verney's Anglo-Saxon and medieval history, is among the first sculptures visitors see as they come from the car park. The young Lithuanian artist gained notoriety by meeting curators and collectors in a sewer at the 2019 Venice Biennale.



Balthasar Nebot's 1738 painting of gardeners toiling over monumental hedging at Hartwell House just outside London © Courtesy of Discover Bucks Museum

For those who prefer a less visceral approach to gardens, we move back inside. A picture of the late filmmaker Derek Jarman's Dungeness garden, by Jarman's friend the celebrated photographer Howard Sooley, provides a prescient eco-alternative to English gardens. It is a gentle curation of plants, rocks and found objects on the pebbly beach around Prospect Cottage, where the HIV-positive Jarman worked from the 1980s until his death in 1994.

Nearby, a picture of Patricia Johanson's "Fair Park Lagoon" in Dallas shows her transformation of a dangerous swamp into an attractive lake in which her muscular, abstract, terracotta-coloured gunita sculptures encourage wildlife and provide a local amenity. Even the kingfishers have returned.

The "wild" gardening theme continues with Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg, who created the "Pollinator Pathmaker" planting in Kensington Gardens, London in 2022. Her installation presents a flower garden from the perspective of bees and other pollinators, plus an [interactive tool](#) for creating insect-friendly plantings whatever your garden's soil and exposure.



Augustas Serapinas's wooden "fence", referencing Compton Verney's Anglo-Saxon and medieval history © Jamie Woodley

Compton Verney's landscape had its pollinator areas before the arrival of Ginsberg's work. Dan Pearson's "William Morris Meadow" was created in 2015 and there are two earlier wild-flower meadows stretching to 80 acres and making gentle backdrops to the house, as well as the new sculptures.

Across the lake from the house, framed by cedars, laurels and their dark vegetation, Brazilian artist Erika Verzutti's glittering, glowing gold-coloured Venus attempts to rectify the male-dominated, male-made landscape; while a 7-metre spider by Louise Bourgeois, the late reluctant hero of feminist art, stalks from Compton Verney's front door to the lake.

Near Bourgeois' spider stands a full-size, five-tonne painted bronze Clydesdale horse and cart, "Perceval", looking as if it has just flown off an English pottery collector's mantelpiece and swallowed some of Alice in Wonderland's instantly enlarging "Eat Me" cake. This is a well-known work by Sarah Lucas, the smart, funny, provocative feminist artist.

To reach Lucas's horse, and indeed the rest of the show, visitors have to cross a serpentine lake, created when Brown dammed a local stream via the Brownian Bridge, guarded by two lead sphinxes. This is a journey Brown would have considered carefully in terms of impressing and pleasing visitors and landowners alike by framing views and placing the carriage drive route to show off the park and house.



Plasticine model of a landscape garden by the late landscape architect Charles Jencks

It appears so natural that it's hard to believe Brown created it without modern surveying equipment, let alone 3D CGI animation to give an instant impression of how his designs would appear as the landscape and trees matured.

Brown and the rest of the English Landscape School gave such beauty to the world that I used to balk at any embellishments or additions. Some still jar, but the care and thought that has gone into Compton Verney's exhibitions, with their site references and celebrations of what has gone before (as well as what might be the future), have begun to change my view. Brownian landscapes are sculpture in their own right but an extra layer of interest doesn't entirely blot out Brown's brio or William Kent's — or anybody else's, come to that.

And the truth is that the English Landscape School is a mishmash of ideas and influences borrowed and reinterpreted by many, including the French artist Claude Lorrain (whose work appears in Compton Verney House), working mostly in Italy and selling his idealised classical landscape paintings to the English on their Grand Tour. The tourists returned to the UK and made flesh what were, until then, largely imaginary landscapes. This small and privileged elite created them for their own delectation on the backs of poorly paid estate workers.

For visitors who would not count Compton Verney as one of their Arcadias, for whatever reason, there are plenty of garden and landscape ideas here to fire the soul and the imagination this springtime. The gallery has been a wonderful collection of ideas and inspiration since its inception. The only puzzle is why it isn't better known.

Five new exhibitions including "Sculpture In the Park" and "Landscape and Imagination, from Gardens to Land Art" launched on March 21. The sculptures will be in place for three years. "Landscape and Imagination, from Gardens to Land Art" closes Sunday June 16; comptonverney.org.uk

[Jane Owen](#) is an FT contributing editor and garden author

Find out about our latest stories first — follow [@FTProperty](#) on X or [@ft_houseandhome](#) on Instagram

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2024. All rights reserved.
