

Crowther's carving, which follows the medullary rays along the length of the piece. At points where branches had grown, subsidiary medullary rays punctuate the flow along the course of the spiral. For some three months the sculpture has been installed in the open air and is beginning to show signs of the colour changing, from fresh creamy-coloured newly cut wood, to darker undersides and sun-bleached ridges.

Keith Seeley commissioned the three sculptures entitled *Shell I–III* 2008. In making the shells Crowther was also pushing forward ideas of what more she could do with wood. Here she developed the forms into different ways of rising and falling, as if shapes were



Shell III 2008 (detail)

trying to emerge from the interior of the wood. *Shell I* has a sharply rising spiral motif that contrasts well with *Shell II* where the spiral's ridges are soft and rounded. In *Shell III* the motif has been refined to two opposing spirals that give rise to roughly semi-spherical swellings spaced evenly across the entire surface. In all three shells the form is interrupted by natural occurrences in the wood; some pieces have hollows, parts cracked, others are marked with medullary rays, all of which adds to the rich blend in the compositions.

In *Kidney I* and *Kidney II* 2008 Crowther is seen testing herself further. These sculptures grew from *Kidney Maquette* 2003 in which she had experimented with carving in direct relation to the annual rings of the wood. The form of a kidney, she felt, offered more possibilities for carving because of its irregular shape. This is visible in the way that her rippling marks are centred on medullary rays that span across the surface of the wood, travelling with natural cracking, or blocked by another event in the surface. These are gentle forms, as soft and apparently malleable as a kidney would be.

The maquettes exhibited here, interestingly, show carving that is of the same size in detail as the carving on her sculptures. The smaller the piece, the relatively larger the carved rippling lines appear to be. These are pieces to be held in the hand, to be seen close up, where every mark tells the story of the wood; unique, as the wood itself. Marks of the gouge, whether as a soft groove in the surface, or as sharper 'waves' and 'ripples', are an essential part of Alison Crowther's sculptural vocabulary, now the hallmark of her art.

Ann Elliott August 2008

Alison Crowther

Alison Crowther was born in Keighley, West Yorkshire, in 1965. She studied 3-Dimensional Design at Buckinghamshire College of Higher Education (1984–87), and Furniture Design at the Royal College of Art, London (1987–89). She has exhibited her work since 1998 in group exhibitions in Britain and the United States. Her recent commissions include work for Swire Properties Ltd, Hong Kong (2006 and 2008), the Cass Foundation at Goodwood (2006) and The Scottish National Trust, Threave Gardens (2004). Her first commission of five carved pews, made in 1996, stands in the Silkstede Chapel, Winchester Cathedral. Crowther's work may be seen regularly at The New Art Centre and Sculpture Park, Roche Court, near Salisbury, Wiltshire; and at the Flow Gallery, Notting Hill, London.



Shell II 2008 (detail)

Some of the works are for sale

Contact Canary Wharf Public Art Office 020 7418 2257

Photographs by Jacqui Hurst

EVENT

Tuesday 14 October 1.15pm

Curator Ann Elliott in conversation with the artist.

Please call 020 7418 2257 to book a place.

List of works (Dimensions h × w × d)

Sculpture

Twisting 2008
Green Oak
75 × 300 × 75 cm
Courtesy Will
Hobhouse

Shell I 2008
Green Oak
60 × 135 × 60 cm
Courtesy Keith
Seeley

Shell II 2008
Green Oak
80 × 130 × 80 cm
Courtesy Keith
Seeley

Shell III 2008
Green Oak
85 × 180 × 85 cm
Courtesy Keith
Seeley

Kidney I 2008
Green Oak
90 × 140 × 90 cm
Courtesy the Artist

Kidney II 2008
Green Oak
90 × 130 × 90 cm
Courtesy the Artist

Maquettes

Kidney Maquette
2003
Green Oak
20 × 30 × 20 cm
Courtesy the Artist

**Bean-pod
Maquette** 2003
Green Oak
18 × 30 × 18 cm
Courtesy the Artist

Kidney Maquette II
2008
Green Oak
18 × 30 × 18 cm
Courtesy the Artist

SCULPTURE IN THE WORKPLACE

Alison Crowther: The Ripple Effect

Curated by Ann Elliott
for Canary Wharf Group

One Canada Square
Canary Wharf, London E14 5AB

15 September to
22 November 2008

Monday to Friday 5.30am–midnight
Saturday & Sunday 7.00am–11.30pm
Information

020 7418 2257

Alison Crowther: The Ripple Effect

Since childhood Alison Crowther has made things with her hands. From furnishing shoebox houses in her extreme youth, to making furniture and sculpture as a successful mid-career artist, Crowther continually pushes at the boundaries of her experience. Always knowing that she wanted to work on furniture, it is the kind of furniture that she wants to create now that keeps her on the fine line that divides sculpture and applied art. In this exhibition of new

sculpture, it is possible to see how making work that has no restrictions connected to practical usage can release ideas through experimentation and exploration of her chosen material: English green oak.

Her decision to use green oak as her preferred medium came about gradually. When studying on the Foundation Course at Bradford and Ilkley Community College

(1983–84), one of the alumni, sculptor and land-artist Andy Goldsworthy (b. 1956), gave a lecture that inspired her. 'His approach of working with natural materials with absolute honesty, making simple, pure work – the suggestions and associations that arose because of the natural materials and what he had done with them – made me think about what I was doing', says Crowther.

Unlike Goldsworthy, however, she has no interest in making work that is ephemeral. She wants both her sculptures and furniture to be lasting, and she does everything she can to ensure that they are.

After a course of study on the BA in 3-Dimensional Design at Buckinghamshire College of Higher

Education (1984–87), which at the time was famed for its furniture-making, Crowther achieved her goal of being accepted on the MA Furniture Design course at the Royal College of Art (1987–89). Here, she decided against handing over her designs and drawings for furniture to

technicians to make, and instead resolved to carve items herself. She sourced green oak, and carved in a corner of the design studio, once she had taken her pieces of wood to the sculpture department to be rough-cut by chainsaw. She received no tuition in carving or in looking after her tools, just a mallet and gouge, and only learned to sharpen the cutting edge through trial and error. As a result of the Great Storm of 1987, she was offered more green oak to carve than she could manage. It was then that she understood her position as a sculptor who makes



Alison Crowther in her West Sussex studio-workshop

furniture – or furniture-maker who makes sculpture – had become a fact of her life. For her there is no confusion, and her functional work still sits happily with her sculpture, her thinking and making of the one assisting her development of the other.

Whilst at the Royal College Crowther invested time in visiting the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Grizedale Forest in Cumbria, and the great gardens and landscapes designed in the past, in order to assist her understanding of what people put into their gardens and why. She also visited graveyards, looking at ancient Yews, drawing inspiration from the sense of place that she found in these locations. All these observations fed into her early works, which she now understands were fairly crude. However, she was confirmed in the fact that green oak was her material. It was readily available in large pieces, and she could source it from ethically managed woodland – something that has become increasingly important to her over the years.

Alison Crowther then embarked on her post-college career as a carver, wanting to make seats that had an empathy with the natural world. 'I could see that there was a gap in the market; grand houses and gardens often had good sculpture, but seating was either traditional, or worse – utilitarian. Even seats set around trees had an unsocial air about them as the sitters look out, not at one another.' Her seats that encircle trees are of a spiral form, so that sitters can both look out and face one another.



Kidney I 2008 (detail)

'However,' Crowther continues, 'I often came across real gems – a camomile seat at Sissinghurst, Kent, for example, or a bench carved in stone set in a grotto lined with shells at Stourhead, Wiltshire.'

Like many young artists, Crowther had to take on other work to support her art. She worked with makers of fine furniture, as a gardener, and taught in the Design Department at Bedales School for six years, before establishing her own studio in 1996 to make a living entirely from her furniture and sculpture.

Whether the piece is functional or not, Crowther allows first the general shape of the wood, then its grain and density, to lead the way in her carving. It seems a simple thing, but she soon discovered that the fact of green wood cracking as it dries could be turned to advantage in both design and sculptural terms. She also accepted other natural characteristics of the wood, and worked with them. 'It's like having a conversation with the wood rather than dominating it,' she says.

In making this group of sculptures, she allowed the wood to dictate both form and surface. *Twisting* 2008 and *Shell I–III* 2008 were made to commission, the other items made to test ideas and to experiment, in a bid to find new ways of working with green oak. Both patrons had already commissioned seating from her, and were confident that she would produce the sort of pieces they were looking for.

Twisting came about because Will Hobhouse wanted a long sculpture measuring some three metres. Crowther showed him photographs of the tree trunk she had sourced from the Leconfield Estate in West Sussex, and he considered this to be the perfect size. From

then on Crowther was free to let the wood take her on the journey of making the sculpture. The form spirals throughout the extent of the sculpture, carved with regard for incident and accident in the growth of the wood. The natural cracking emphasises the form, as does



Kidney I 2008 (detail)



Shell I 2008 (detail)