

From a former cow shed to an avant garde art gallery

Vanessa Thorpe
*Arts and Media
Correspondent*

Sun 1 Jul 2018 06.00 BST



The Canwood Gallery.

Farmer turned gallery-owner Stephen Dale tells how he has brought the world of modern art to a field in Herefordshire

A cow shed and an old tractor barn in rural Herefordshire are not where most people would go in search of the avant garde or the latest in abstract painting. But retired farmer Stephen Dale is challenging the assumption that modern art is best appreciated by city dwellers.

A run of exhibitions staged by the 74-year-old at the free public art gallery he set up two years ago in Checkley, near Hereford, have now drawn big names from the art world and proved the scale of an appetite for the unexpected in the countryside.

Canwood Gallery and Sculpture Park, built by Dale on arable land he once farmed, is opening a show of previously unseen paintings by the veteran Royal Academician Anthony Whishaw. The exhibition, *Experiences of Nature*, also features the work of Whishaw's late wife, the artist Jean Gibson, as well as a sculpture by her famous former pupil, Nicole Farhi.



'Running a farm and running a gallery turn out to be equally stressful,' says Stephen Dale.

Dale's unusual, charitable plan to create a gallery in an area of outstanding natural beauty was financed by the sale of much of his land. The farmer's strong feeling for unconventional art emerged more than 40 years ago, while he was undergoing a difficult and long round of experimental treatments for leukaemia in the 1970s. Travelling down to London to take part in a series of drug trials at St Bartholomew's hospital, Dale entertained himself in his free time with visits to art galleries. An early trip to see Carl Andre's notorious arrangement of bricks, Equivalent VIII, at the Tate changed his life. A passion for modern art was born. "It may sound strange, but the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. I guess I fell in love with the bricks," Dale said.

On subsequent visits he discovered Mark Rothko, Barbara Hepworth, Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin and many more. "We used to laugh a little at Dad's interest in it all," Dale's daughter, Hannah, told the *Observer*. "But the success of the gallery has changed that."

Dale has never known whether to put his survival down to the gruelling drugs he tested, or the morale boost of his new-found love of modern art. He is sure, however, that those who live in rural areas deserve to see the most provocative work. And any profits made from sales at his Canwood shows are donated to Barts. In Canwood's first major exhibition last summer, Bricks in the Sticks - A Farmer's Inspiration, Dale featured a piece made by Carl Andre himself. The American artist's Isoclast 07 graphite bricks installation, bought by Dale at auction, stood alongside the work of other international artists. A show of Matisse prints followed, and visitors rolled in.

"Running a farm and running a gallery turn out to be equally stressful," said Dale. "I did not expect the numbers of people we have coming, nor the standard of artists."

While Dale aims at the sort of regional significance enjoyed by the Yorkshire Sculpture Park near Wakefield, he also likes the idea of the example set by former farmer and Glastonbury Festival host Michael Eavis at Worthy Farm in Somerset: "A festival like that for visual arts would be something."



Sudden Flight by Anthony Whishaw, 88, is delighted by the new gallery. The artist, who has works in the Tate's permanent collection and two paintings on show at the Royal Academy this summer, has a reputation for playful abstract responses to the natural world. "Canwood has the space to take some of my large paintings, which are hard to show," he said. "There are fairly abstract images of trees and birds. I'm always interested in what the eye perceives before you understand what you are seeing."

He met his late wife while they were both students at the Royal College of Art. Gibson was a member of the London Group and created acclaimed work categorised by critics as “organic minimalism”. She regularly exhibited paintings and sculpture from the 1960s until her death in 1991.

When Farhi, the clothes designer who is married to the playwright David Hare, turned away from fashion towards art in recent years, it was Gibson who guided her during sculpture lessons given in the Kensington studio she shared with Whishaw. “Jean changed my life,” Farhi has said. “Through her teaching, I learned more than expressing ideas and feelings. She opened my eyes on the world around me, as if I was seeing it for the first time, and so she helped me to discover who I was.”

Farhi’s sculpture of Whishaw’s hand and forearm is to go on display in the new show at Canwood.

Experiences of Nature runs from 1 July to 29 July.

Since you’re here...

... we have a small favour to ask. More people are reading The Guardian than ever but advertising revenues across the media are falling fast. And unlike many news organisations, we haven’t put up a paywall - we want to keep our journalism as open as we can. So you can see why we need to ask for your help.

The Guardian is editorially independent, meaning we set our own agenda. Our journalism remains truly independent - free from commercial influence and shareholder bias. No one edits our Editor. No one steers our opinion. The Guardian’s independent, investigative reporting takes a lot of time, money and hard work to produce. But we do it because we believe our perspective matters - because it might well be your perspective, too.

If everyone who reads our reporting, who likes it, helps to support it, our future would be much more secure. **For as little as £1, you can support the Guardian - and it only takes a minute. Thank you.**

Support The Guardian



Topics

- Art
- The Observer
- Exhibitions
- features