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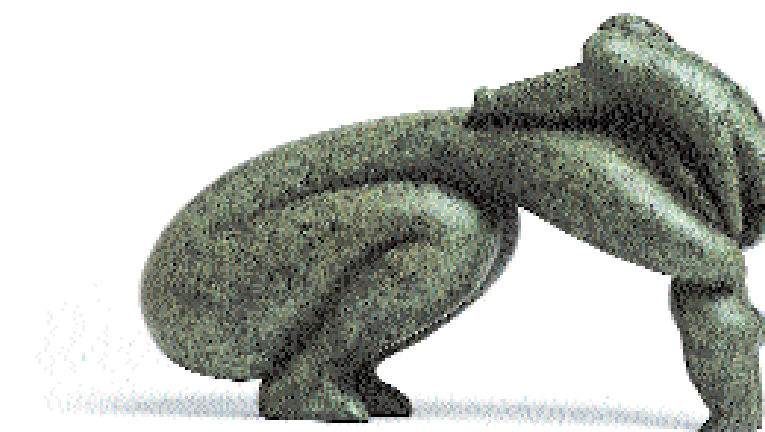
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*Vanessa Pooley has wanted to be a sculptor ever since she was a little girl. She tells Annie Hirst how she achieved her lifelong ambition.*

# A lifelong passion

## FAIRFAX GALLERY

Burnham Market Chelsea Tunbridge Wells



Robina Yasmin 'The Flypast' Oil on Canvas 19.5" x 19.5"

### CHRISTMAS EXHIBITION 26th November - 4th January

The 2005 Christmas Exhibition will be an eclectic mix of contemporary paintings, sculpture and ceramics by the Gallery's favourite artists.

The Fairfax Gallery, North Street, Burnham Market, Norfolk  
Tel: 01328 730001 www.fairfaxgallery.com

With a Christmas exhibition in Holt and another in London, Norwich sculptor Vanessa Pooley is as busy as ever. She plans to show nine to 10 bronzes from her distinctive "mother and child" series at both exhibitions with some ceramics also on display at the mixed exhibition at the Bircham Contemporary Arts Gallery in Holt.

Preparing that amount of work requires some considerable time as a bronze figure takes three months to make and another three months to cast – and longer if it's on a larger scale.

However, Vanessa finds the time to interrupt her schedule to tell me more about her work – and her life.

We're sitting in her studio in the heart of the city surrounded by work in progress as well as finished sculptures.

The largest of these – Big PB – is five feet long and still waiting for a good home.

And here we have one of the drawbacks of being a sculptor – cash flow. When a sculptor creates a figure there's no knowing whether it will sell quickly or not.

"I have a lot of money tied up in bronze and until a piece sells, there's no income," explains Vanessa. "It is expensive to cast in bronze, and when I make my pieces, I've no idea if anyone will buy them."

Fortunately for Vanessa, people do buy her work and her prices have risen gradually over the 20 years that she has been exhibiting. But you get the sense that Vanessa would carry on anyway.

"I knew I wanted to be an artist at nursery school," says Vanessa, who was born and grew up in Norwich.

"I wasn't exactly encouraged and when I went to the Hewett School they were keen for me to do a 'proper' degree.

"So I went to York to study sociology but after two terms, I came back to do a foundation year at Norwich School of Art.

"Then I did a fine art degree in sculpture followed by a postgraduate diploma at City and Guilds in London."

The capital proved a big draw as Vanessa stayed there for two decades before returning to Norwich.

"There's more of a critical group in London," explains Vanessa who returned home to Norfolk when she had her family.

Her career began in London when she organised her own exhibition at Southwark Cathedral and she hasn't looked back since. She was appointed a Fellow of the Royal Society of British Sculptors in 2003.

"I was amazed that people came along and bought the work – I had no idea that they would," confides Vanessa.

However, the work has continued to sell and her "mother and child" figures have been sold all over the country.

"I've always done the female form and always sculpture – I've never wanted to paint and I'm hopeless at drawing. I just feel incredibly lucky that I'm able to do it. I've known what I've wanted to do all my life and I'm doing it."

So just what does it involve?

"I start in a haphazard way with a sausage-shaped ball of clay and make the figure from this. Then I use the 'cire per du' method – lost wax – to make the mould.

"Then it goes to be cast – I have a good relationship with a local foundry who understands what I want them to be and we

use various chemicals to give different patinas.

"The figures range from seven inches to five feet long and generally I'm working on three or four pieces at the same time. Not all the figures are cast in bronze – we select a few each time."

With such an involved process, it is easy to see why it takes so many months, and a couple of years for Big PB.

I ask Vanessa if her style has changed over the years.

"I've attempted to make it more autobiographical, more about my life, so I developed from sculpting women alone to mother and child. I have two boys so mother and child is more of a connection to my own life.

"And I think my later work is slightly more abstracted, it has more texture and also I concentrate more on the overall form and pay less attention to fine details such as fingernails."

Talking about influences, Vanessa cites the work of John Buck – "I really admire his sculptures and I'm trying to work out how I can get to his next exhibition."

However, Vanessa isn't as complimentary about the work of her one-time neighbour, Tracey Emin.

"She was in the next studio when I was in Kenninghall and I really liked her. I always read her newspaper column but her work, well that's not for me, though I wish I'd

bought some for a fiver when I had the chance!" she laughs.

Isn't hindsight a wonderful thing? But, I doubt whether selling a Tracey Emin for a lot of money would have detracted Vanessa from the path she set out on at nursery school – though it would have certainly paid for a lot of bronze!

Strangely, Vanessa says that she has no idea where the desire to sculpt came from as there are no other artists in the family. "We're a family of lawyers and I think they always wanted me to get a proper job," she says.

Well, they are still waiting and, as Vanessa has work to prepare both for Holt and for London where she is showing alongside Anita Klein (whose work she also admires), I take my leave.

It's damp and dismal outside; quite a contrast to the warmth and emotion in Vanessa's figures ●

**For details of Vanessa's work, look on her website at: [www.vanessapooley.co.uk](http://www.vanessapooley.co.uk)**  
**Exhibitions: Monumental Women, Boundary Gallery, 98 Boundary Road, London, NW8 ORH. Tel 020 7624 1126. Website: [www.boundarygallery.com](http://www.boundarygallery.com) From November 24 until December 24.**  
**Bircham Contemporary Arts Gallery, 14 Market Place, Holt, Norfolk, NR25 6BW. Tel 01263 713312. December 3 to January 7. Open Monday to Saturday, 9am to 5pm.**