



Charles Poulsen with *Point of Resolution*.
Photo: Angus Blackburn.

Charles Poulsen Growing sculpture

Fi Martynoga meets the Borders sculptor whose living, growing works add another dimension to the landscape while providing habitats for wildlife.

The 'Stripey Man' – that was how a small child referred to Charlie Poulsen when he encountered him a few years ago. He'd noticed the striped waistcoat and socks, and had visited the house where stripes adorn walls and transform mundane objects such as a caravan in the garden.

The epithet describes something about Charlie, but belies the actual complexity of his art. For Charlie is a sculptor and has that sophisticated

understanding of three dimensions that is denied to most of us. If I were to draw a striped pattern, it would be flat and pedestrian. When he does so, it is eye-catching and informative, and full of depth.

I think of Charlie Poulsen as someone who works in lead. This material still forms the majority of his studio work. But for the past few years he has become fascinated by the potential for growing art, as he explains: "The idea sprang from

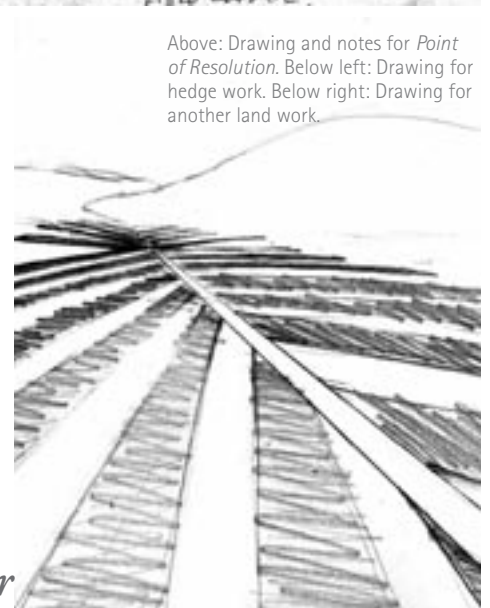
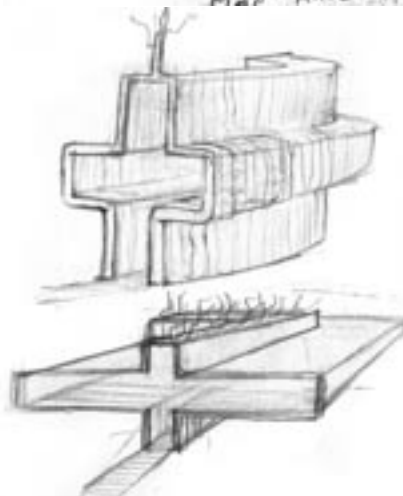
horticulture. I like the traditional espaliers and fans used for fruit trees, and could see lots of possibilities in pleaching, which involves weaving trees together. I made a start with a hedge in my own garden about eight or nine years ago. I didn't have a total vision of how the piece would look when grown. But I was able to decide the curve of the planting trench and to set up a structure for training the saplings. I knew I wanted stripes!"

That first hedge is planted with willows. “This isn’t conventional topiary. I didn’t want it to be heavy so I chose an airy, deciduous species that we would be able to see through. I want to take the idea a bit further than the gardeners of the past took it, with more abstract forms and more extreme angles.” Charlie’s drawings show what he means: young trees in regular rows are bent at 90 degree angles to create a formal garden. Older trees are bent to embrace objects such as a great leaning monolith or to support a boat raised twenty feet in the air. Another drawing shows trees trained to create a large, vertical hoop before they grow on up in more natural shapes.

“Trees excite me most. They are awe-inspiring plants. Look at beeches with their tight skin over their muscular trunks! The problem is that they take a long time to grow. If you want to do things with trees, you have to be patient and think about the long term.” This causes trouble with art projects that are conventionally funded. Charlie has put forward proposals for several public art schemes but gets turned down, not because the suggestions don’t excite people, but because the work cannot be completed within the meagre allocation of time, which is usually just a year, or at most two. “Even the people at Wooplaw Wood, the original community woodland, turned me down. They had money and they wanted the work but we couldn’t make my proposals conform to the funders’ rules.”

One piece of public art did find favour and was executed in 2005 as a feature on the Southern Upland Way. This is Charlie’s *Point of Resolution* for which he has received much acclaim. “I’d envisaged a series of different plantings that would be visible from different points along the path. In the end, there was very little money available, so we used a single site.”

Of four possible sites suggested by the Forestry Commission, Charlie chose one on the Minchmuir, in the Border Hills between Traquair and



Above: Drawing and notes for *Point of Resolution*. Below left: Drawing for hedge work. Below right: Drawing for another land work.

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Selkirk. It had a good view out over a long, tapering stretch of heather moorland. Told that the heather was periodically cut to increase the number of young shoots for grouse to feed on, Charlie immediately saw an opportunity to use the hillside as

a canvas and make vast marks on it with mowing machines. “The idea was exciting. I thought about how circles only look like circles when you view them from above and decided to exploit that by cutting a series of large ellipses in the heather in such a

way that, when seen from a particular point, they all would look circular.”

To execute this grand design, Charlie needed a co-worker. Instead of using his wife, Pauline, who is too busy making her own remarkable artworks using quilting techniques, he employed a sculptor friend, Sam Wade. “It was cold up on that moor in April. Sam was all right as he was rushing around on the hill with marker canes. I was stuck on the hill, shouting ‘Left a bit! Right a bit!’ and getting frozen, but there was no other way to get the ellipses marked out.”

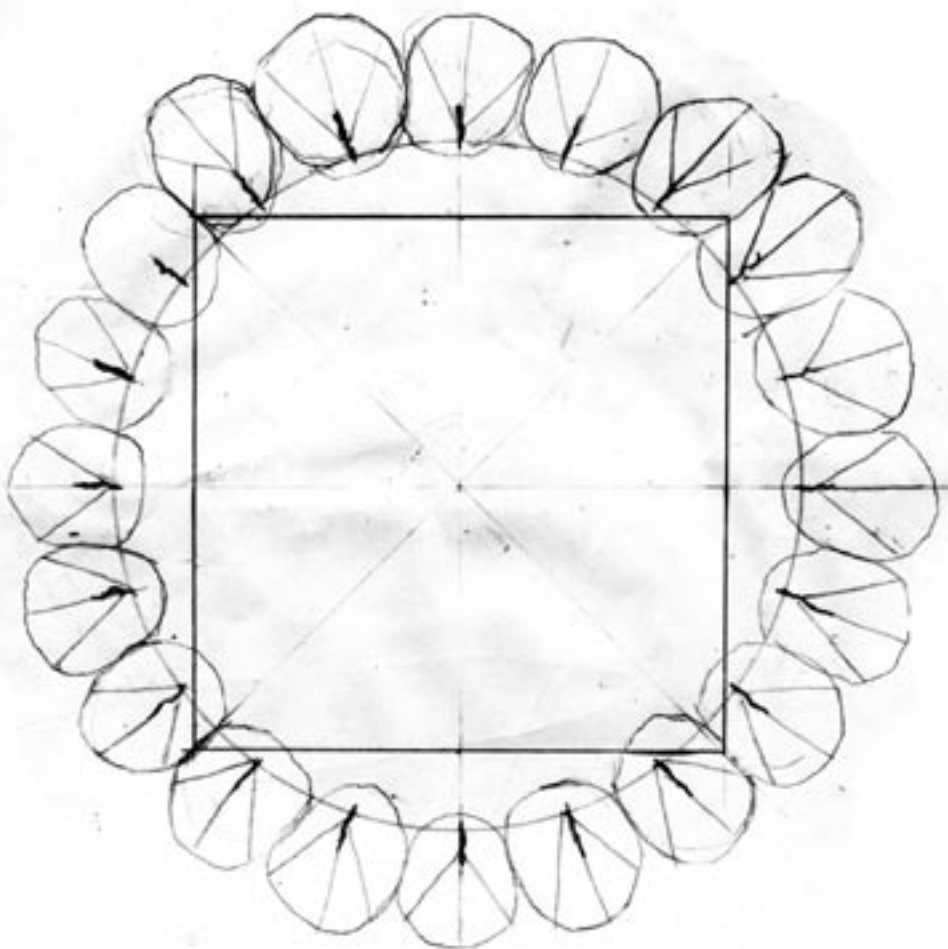
The result is spectacular. Even the mountain-bikers stop to view the rings in the heather. It’s a transformation that makes you look at the landscape and think about form. And of course, it is also contributing to biodiversity.

Charlie has other works under way. Last summer he planted a series of olive trees round an old threshing floor in Massiera della Zingara, Italy. These will be trained to form a giant bowl round the existing circle of limestone. At home, he is working near Lauder in woods that belong to botanist David Long. Already established is a row of trees at an angle. Planned for this year is a spiral tower using ash trees. ‘I will have to use frames to form the spiral whilst the trees are young, but it is an innately strong shape and will be self-supporting after a few years.’

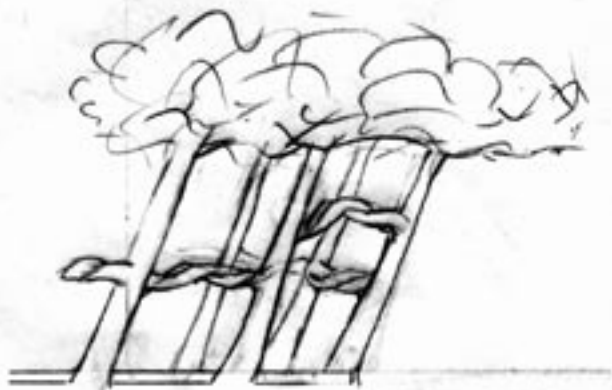
People talk about art imposed on the countryside needing to have a natural lifespan and to decay after a few years. Here is Charles Poulsen creating works which, from the start, will form useful habitats. They will mature over many years, changing gradually as nature re-asserts itself over art. How will the landscape historians of the future view these ‘culturally modified trees’? Will they be puzzled or will they, more correctly, look upon them as mysterious relics of some past imagination?

www.growingsculpture.com

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Plan for planting at Masseria della Zingara - Oct. 2009



Woven branches drawing