

# Delicately balanced

Juliet Gutch is an Ilkley-based artist who makes a special type of sculpture with her husband, Jamie. Joan Ransley finds out more.



**I**t is unseasonably cold and blustery for June and I am hiking along a steep gravel path to White Wells, the landmark stone building high on Ilkley Moor to meet the artist Juliet Gutch. Juliet designs and makes mobiles and has spent the last few months studying the colours, shapes, textures and structures found on the moor to inspire an exciting new series of mobiles for the Ilkley Art Trail this weekend.

I am joining Juliet for a trial hanging of her first outdoor mobile, *Untethered*, against the backdrop of craggy outcrops, rushing becks and architectural vegetation which characterises this magnificent Yorkshire landscape.

As we choose a branch from which to hang this latest creation, Juliet explains what a mobile is. "Often people think of mobiles as toys hanging above babies' cots rather than an art form," she says.

"Mobiles are, in fact, a type of suspended sculpture composed of carefully balanced moving parts that can be set in motion by the lightest touch or gentlest breeze."

Mobiles were made famous by their inventor Alexander Calder, the 20th century American sculptor. "Calder certainly influenced our work but over the past 15 years we have slowly developed our own way of designing and constructing mobiles," says Juliet.

Juliet, who lives in Ilkley and was brought up in Yorkshire, makes mobiles with the help of

her husband Jamie. "We each started making mobiles independently in the late 1990s and met in 2001 when a mutual friend thought we would have a lot in common. Although we quickly began collaborating on various projects, it took 10 years and a commission from John Lewis before we finally thought of ourselves as an artistic partnership."

The commission for John Lewis, *An Exaltation of Larks*, at the Westfield store, opposite the former Olympic site in London, is a permanent installation of three mobiles inspired by skylarks flying across East End marshes.

The calming and stilling effect of the mobiles has also made them suited to therapeutic settings. In 2015 Juliet and Jamie were commissioned to make *A Murmuration of Starlings* based on the flight

patterns of starlings for the atrium of the new Northumbria Specialist Emergency Care Hospital.

I ask Juliet how she came up with the design for *Untethered*. "We were approached by Newby Hall who wanted to exhibit a mobile in their sculpture park this summer. The design was based on a wooden mobile from a series called *Swift as Light* for the gallery jaggedart on Marylebone High Street in London.

"We wanted to make a piece in copper, a material that changes colour and develops a patina over time. I loved the idea of a piece being at the whim of the weather. James Wilkinson, a blacksmith and metal fabricator based in Helperby, North Yorkshire, was commissioned to forge the shapes. We then sanded and finished them before assembling the mobile."

I am fascinated by how the elements of *Untethered* are held in equilibrium and fixed together even as the wind gusts and rain showers scud across the moor.

"There are two key challenges in constructing our mobiles. Firstly, I have to find the tiny point of balance on each piece as I progress up from the lowest element. I do this by balancing each part of the mobile on the point of a needle. It always amazes me how interdependent all the pieces are to the balance of the whole. We are interested in how the whole sculpture has a grace and energy greater than the sum of its parts," says Juliet.

"The next challenge is how to link the mobile together. With *Untethered*, we explored using a thick transparent fishing yarn to give the illusion the piece is floating. Its durability was a problem

## ART IN MOTION:

Main picture, Juliet Gutch working on one of her mobiles and, above right, on Ilkley Moor; top, *Untethered*; above, *Music Surfacing*.

PICTURES: JOAN RANSLEY AND DAVID LINDSAY.

and it did not work aesthetically. Eventually we came up with the idea of making a chain with copper split rings, which work well."

The process of making the latest series of mobiles started with Juliet spending time on the moor looking for things that caught her eye, such as the shadow of a piece of grass on a lone rock, young bilberry shoots emerging from the peaty soil or stones in the beck. She recorded what she saw by taking photographs and making sketches.

These were used to develop a range of templates based on shapes, such as a leaf or the line of a bird's wing, and became the basis for the shapes which were rough sanded and then selected for the final mobiles.

Juliet compares the selection of wooden shapes to the selection of notes in a musical





→ composition, with time and performance playing a part in the final work.

Juliet and Jamie often base their work around collective nouns for example, *An Exaltation of Larks*, *A Murmuration of Starlings* and *A Siege of Cranes*. If there is no appropriate noun, they sometimes make one up – they called one series *An Embrace of Trees* inspired by two trees (an ash and a sycamore) which had become entwined as they grew.

Words are important to Juliet and she has written 20 poems to accompany this series of mobiles for the Ilkley Art Trail, which runs today and tomorrow. Each mobile in this series has taken its name from one of the poems.

One of the mobiles in the current series – *The Wonder of Yellow* – was inspired by the vibrancy of gorse which flowers in the depth of winter, regardless of the weather. The yellow was created on one side of the mobile using a wool Melton fabric manufactured by AW Hainsworth, in Pudsey.

Other pieces have been inspired by observations Juliet has made about dry stone walls which are a feat of balance. They delineate the landscape and become microcosms for small wildlife such as bats that also use the walls to navigate.

Recently the equilibrium of the moor has been threatened by devastating wildfires. In making the



**FROM SKETCH TO HOOK:** Yorkshire-born Juliet drawing in her studio in Ilkley.

works, and writing the poems, Juliet says: "I have been increasingly aware of the need to protect and care for this local landscape which is owned by us all. There is a freedom to a moor: unlike other areas of countryside, the public can roam anywhere and I wanted to somehow express that sense of freedom. Mobiles are a good medium to do this."

Watching Juliet's mobile turn in the breeze

on Ilkley Moor, I wonder what people get out of having them hanging in their homes. One of their customers Marilyn Gordon summed it up as follows: "To gaze at the silent, gentle movements casting weird and wonderful shadows on the wall has been therapeutic for me as a sufferer of depression. My mobile is a beautifully crafted, moving piece of art."

Another, Lady Diana Brittan, says: "What I love about Jamie and Juliet's mobiles is that they give me such joy. I've hung mine in the dining area of my kitchen, and the changing light and air currents of the room reflect on the mobile, under which I sit watching it change and move."

Professor Janet Cade, of Leeds University, says: "Our mobile gives me a sense of lightness and movement. I love the shapes and smooth, patterned wood if you look closely. Much more interesting, and ever changing than a picture."

We finish the walk and as we load the mobile back in the car Juliet's parting words are "I feel strongly that alongside art which questions and challenges there is also a place for art that is positive and life-affirming."

■ **Juliet and Jamie Gutch can be contacted via [www.julietandjamiegutch.com](http://www.julietandjamiegutch.com). Their work is on view as part of Ilkley Art Trail which runs today and tomorrow. For more details go to [www.ilkleysarts.org](http://www.ilkleysarts.org)**

