

ART ATTACK

Sculptor Matt Baker likes nothing better than to surprise visitors with pieces of land art hidden in the Dumfries & Galloway countryside. He talks to **Mary Smith** about his long road to success in the art world, via architecture – and the circus

Main image by George Carrick

Lots of people know sculptor Matt Baker's work without necessarily knowing who created it. They may have come across carved stone heads in an abandoned sheepfold in the Galloway Forest, bronze casts floating on St Mary's Loch in the Borders, or a group of carved boulders high on the Clints of Dromore in Cairnmore National Nature Reserve – and been delighted by the discovery.

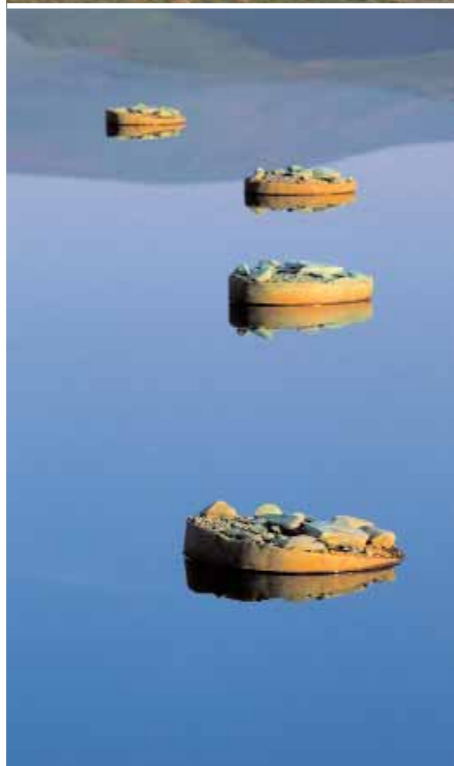
"When people meet me, they know my work but they don't know I made it," Matt says. "They've seen my work – Devorgilla in Dumfries or the Quorum heads for example – and half the time they don't realise it's an artwork. They have no idea I made it."

"I enjoy placing things where people will find them. I like that people are not going out specifically to see an artwork. Some people go deliberately to find something and then I worry about their reaction. I'm completely independent, with no gallery, no promoter, no name – and no one to say: 'You can't do that.'"

Matt, whose studio is near Auldirth, was born in Devon, although his mother is from Scotland. For the last 12 or more years, he has focused on work in the public domain, both landscape and urban art. He has worked on large-scale projects in Glasgow and Inverness – where he is currently lead artist for the Old Town area – as well as throughout Dumfries & Galloway.

He knew from the age of 14 that he wanted to become a sculptor, but it took some years of wandering down different pathways before he realised his ambition. It was his art teacher at school in Devon who first fired Matt's enthusiasm for working in stone. "He gave me stone to work with when I was 14," he says. "I had made a clay maquette and when my teacher looked at it he said it should be in stone. The next day, he brought in stone and chisels. I loved it. I knew what I wanted to do."

Unfortunately, Matt's careers teacher was less enthusiastic about the idea, telling him that being a sculptor was not a career option. Instead, he did a search for what might suit someone good at sculpting – and architecture



Shinglehook, at St Mary's Loch, includes bronze castings floating on the water



Quorum, depicting carved stone heads, can be found in old sheep pens in Galloway Forest Park

turned up. "I thought: 'Well, okay, buildings are just big sculptures,'" remembers Matt. "I went off to architectural school at Sheffield University where I discovered that when it came to things like the turning circles of trucks I hadn't a scoobie and I couldn't do roofs."

"I did enjoy parts of the course such as the meanings of spaces. I got a lot out of that and became fascinated by the meaning of place, which, with its connotations of history and identity, has become extremely important to me and my work. By the time I finished the course, however, I knew I wasn't going to be an architect."

Matt was not the only one who did not want him to become an architect. The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) external assessors wanted to fail him.

"This really narked the school and my professor came to my defence," says Matt. "Each architect school enters two students in a national competition organised annually by RIBA and my school submitted my work. I came second. So, there I was, the second best young architecture student in Britain, and I didn't want to be an architect."

Matt 'dropped out' and went to live in a squat in East London with a group of people building a training centre for aerial circus skills. He says: "It was mostly rigging work but I also did some work on the trapeze, though it would be overstretching the mark to say I made a living as a trapeze artist."

After two or three years, Matt needed to get out of London and moved to the Forest of Dean in Gloucestershire. Here, he met the man who was to turn his life around.

"I was introduced to Bryant Fedden, who was a sculptor and letter cutter," he says. "He quite literally saved me. I wasn't going anywhere with anything and I did a traditional apprenticeship under him."

"He could do amazing things with wood and invented his own alphabet. He taught me to do letter cutting, saying that if I couldn't make a living as a sculptor at least I could



Matt Baker with some of the birds he created for What the Swallows Find, a one-day public art event held on the banks of the Nith in Dumfries in April

always make a living doing gravestones. He was a generous man, and taught me what it was to live the life of an artist."

Matt's first major commission came from the Freeminers of the Forest of Dean who asked him to create a memorial to a flooding disaster in which two brothers died. A friend of Matt's had told the miners he was really good at carving hands, which was important to the project – when the water level went down and the bodies of the brothers were recovered, it was found that they had been holding hands when they drowned.

Matt stayed on site for 10 weeks, carving the monument on locally quarried stone. "Working there was a real revelation. Everyone was coming up to see what I was doing and to tell me stories – tiny little stories, all contributing to everyone's sense of place," he says. "It made it all real to me and the opening day was one of the best days of my life."

"It brought everything together for me – place, history, the forces that shaped it and allowing other people to feel that. The project was absolutely fundamental in terms of what I went on to do."

In 1997 Matt was commissioned to create artworks for the Galloway Forest Sculpture Trail. One of the stipulations of the residency was that the artist had to live in Galloway for eight weeks, so Matt bought a caravan.

Arriving in Galloway was like coming home. "Mum is from Ayrshire via Stranraer," he explains, "and I had been here as a wee

boy, but it was extraordinary coming back and finding I had all these aunts and cousins. It was wonderful to feel connected. It was lucky enough to come to this place and be able to make something you think is right, but I had the added bonus of feeling I was coming home – and I stayed."

Matt created three works during the residency: Prolonged Exposure, Covenant and Quorum – six heads carved in granite and whinstone dyke stones and replaced in old sheep pens.

Matt's work also took him away from the peace and quiet of rural Galloway to work in Glasgow where he and colleague, photographer Dan Dubowitz, worked on a project utilising wasteland spaces. This led to Matt becoming lead artist for the Gorbals regeneration project.

"They were clearing out Sixties tower blocks and building new stuff but, as usual, there was very little communication with the people who lived there," Matt explains. "We thought art could bridge that divide and it was successful in many ways."

Matt's Gatekeeper is a stunning bronze hanging figure, described variously as the 'angel of the Gorbals' or 'the hinging witch'. It made headlines in publications from art journals to national newspapers, including one story reporting that people had seen the angel's hand bleed.

"It really was quite mad," says Matt. "Apparently some reddish liquid was seen

seeping from the sculpture and it was reported in The News of The World."

Another of Matt's works is sited on the island of Cumrae where he carved two sandstone figures overlooking the ferry slipway. The sculpture was damaged when someone shot it with a high-velocity rifle.

"It was a political act against the council. Some people said they wanted a car park but the council said they were getting a sculpture," explains Matt. "It hits emotionally when someone damages work. I put precious things in public places, which generates mixed feelings among those who view them."

"I'm very interested in how my work interacts with the environment. More often than not I make things using materials such as stone, bronze, and oak. The way I use these materials is about the fact that they're not forever. It's my way of trying to interact with the ongoing process of change and time that we're all aware of."

"I expect to see the work at Cairnmore Nature Reserve change, be covered in lichen, and disappear over time. However, that's not the same thing as having it deliberately vandalised."

"I'm a site-specific artist. I get involved and allow that process to suggest what the work will be. Whether landscape or town centre, I think it's important to allow people to see landscapes are in a state of flux."

■ Matt will be exhibiting at the Mill on the Fleet, Gatehouse of Fleet, in August. More information on his work can be found at www.mattbaker.org.uk.