

# *Culture*

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Richard Stone, *i want to be a sufi dancer*, statuario marble 35 x 30 x 30 cm  
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# Slow beauty

Artist **Richard Stone** balances life between his east London studio and the Tuscan marble town of Pietrasanta. But it was his upbringing in Devon that led him to appreciate the importance of slowness, which he now sees as intrinsic to his work.

*Words by Anna McMahon.*



*locket, oil, oil stick on canvas, ivy, sunflower overprint, tulip wood moulding, dark oak finish, 90 x 120 x 4 cm*

Pietrasanta at first glance looks a typical Italian town, located between the foothills of the marble-bearing Apuan Alps and the beach resorts of Tuscany's northern coastline. The town square, founded in 1255, is crammed with buildings clad in terracotta tiles and dark green shutters. In the early afternoon there is a bustle of locals going about their daily routine, chatting and stopping for aperitivi.

Pietrasanta literally translates as 'Holy Stone'. Here, local artigiani for generations have shaped stone quarried in nearby Carrara. It may be an urban legend, but it's said that Michelangelo travelled from Florence to Pietrasanta to acquire the marble for many of his works, and it is at Café Michelangelo, under a striking medieval church tower, that Richard Stone and I dig a little deeper.

Born in Torbay, Devon, Richard spent his childhood and early adulthood there before finally moving to London where he studied fine art at Central Saint Martins after being awarded a British Academy full bursary. His early life in Devon, close to the coast, instilled in him an appreciation for the rhythm of seasons and the ebb and flow of the tide, nature's calm but unremitting pace of life. It was Pietrasanta that had him truly channel this into his art. Richard first visited Pietrasanta in 2013 after being awarded a scholarship by the Royal Society of Sculptors in bronze casting at Fonderia Artistica Mariani, one of the most established foundries. He remembers, "I instantly connected with the pace, the energy, the abundance of beauty both for creativity but also as a cornerstone of everyday life." With days spent cycling to work through cobbled streets to bronze and marble foundries, Richard's focus was both on making and on deepening his connection to the artists and artigiani who reside here.

His most influential connection was Helaine Blumenfeld, the American-born sculptor who is a mainstay of modern British contemporary sculpture, recognised for the seemingly alive flowing forms she creates. Helaine's public works are installed in cities across the world, most recently in London's Canary Wharf with *Fortuna*. Awarded an OBE for her contribution to the arts, she would oversee Richard's process, urging him to move away from the traditional sculptural schools of thought – figuration and abstraction – and instead to dance in between. Moreover, she encouraged him to look within, rather than to draw on conceptual influences or existing art historical movements.

"I've always been drawn to the sensuality of things," he reflects, "and this is no different in the materials I work with. When I am sculpting, the work emerges directly from the wax or clay, without any preparatory sketches. I'm mindful of not overthinking, I'm much more interested in an unhindered conversation between psyche and physical form. When I'm making, there is a recurrent sense of colliding the figure and landscape, of connecting to the weather, or movement in its purest form."



Richard Stone in his studio



Stone's largest marble work to date: *tutelar*, 2018, statuario marble, 95 x 50 x 50 cm



*only in the ruins will you be free*, 2014, statuario marble, 91 x 61 x 12cm

This is most striking in Richard's recent abstract paintings, which, despite the intense movement, appear balanced and especially cohesive when they sit alongside his sculpture.

Asked whether memories of the South West coast influence his work, he responds: "That's hard to answer, as I've never been interested in intentionally portraying one specific place, more a sensation of many places. That said, there are dark rocky outcrops on the north coast of Devon and of course the striking beauty and light of Land's End, which always resonate with me. If I feel something profound when I see a landscape, then I suspect it lingers within me on a deeper level and, with time, it may emerge in my work."

Working in this way requires a certain patience. Richard's practice guides him wherever it needs to go.

He flits between sculpture, painting and sometimes installation. "To me, the flitting is really important. Working on a painting can allow a sculptural form to sit, meaning I can return to it with fresher eyes." I'm curious as to whether this causes any frustration or rubs against commercial goals. "Well, it can," he smirks, "but it reminds me in some way of growing up in Torbay. Each year, the town would change completely with the coming and going of the tourist season, but there was never any use in fighting it, only learning to surrender to it, to go with this sharp contrast of rhythms."

There is a common language in all of Richard's work regardless of medium, in that in each case the viewer is asked to slow down, to observe and to allow a certain feeling to be evoked. It's this focus, on the experiential aspects of his work, for which *only in the ruins will you*

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*I've always been drawn to the sensuality of things... I'm mindful of not overthinking.*



*his key monochrome*, 2018, oil, oil stick on canvas, ivy, tulip wood moulding, dark oak finish, 90 x 120 x 4cm

*be free* – a shimmering, flowing white flag – has special resonance. “At first this work may seem to simply be a white flag, but the movement of the flag is actually quite visceral and haunting.”

Sometimes the influence of the local environment is more direct. Reflecting on a bronze work he made in Pietrasanta, “in the shade of the magnolias was a reworking of buds and branches growing near my studio.” The work embodies both strength and fragility, and, cast in 12 parts, perfectly balanced – the branch appears to float. “It was a real honour to have this piece selected for the recent Royal Society of Sculptors Summer Exhibition because it’s an organisation that I’m extremely proud to be a fellow and trustee of, but also because I was among some very talented peers.”

The last couple of years have been busy for him, with his works increasingly collected in the UK and the US. He was recently featured in Michael Petry’s book *Nature Morte*, which put him alongside artists including Damien Hirst, David Hockney and Ai Weiwei. The exhibition of the same name travelled to several European museums before returning to London’s Guildhall in late 2017. “It was a privilege to have a bronze sculpture travel with this show, but the return to London was particularly important to me, not least because it signalled a real acceleration of interest in my work and the start of a busy period which continues to date.”

Since then, Richard had his second solo show with his London gallery, Kristin Hjellegjerde, and in May

he appeared in a Sky Arts documentary which explored Helaine Blumenfeld’s work in depth. In April of this year, he released *tutelar*, his largest marble work to date at Art Brussels, one of Europe’s premier art fairs. “There was something quite profound about making a piece of work which, upon its plinth, stands life size. Creating a figure at that scale, whilst retaining refinement and elegance, was quite a challenge.”

*tutelar*, alongside Richard’s other recent marble works, again crosses back into a style of classicism with a contemporary twist, being carved from heavy stone. But with his skill, the edges are so refined, the works are softened substantially, they appear to float and glisten. “There is beauty but also joy in these works. Maybe they say something about hope, about the future, about remaining focused on what beauty is. And given where we are, politically, I think that’s more important than ever.”

There is heightened demand for Richard’s work, but creativity requires pause. “I’ve learned that I must take time out to nurture my own creative process. London is amazing because of all of the connections and constant encounters that take place, but whenever I set foot on an English coast, or return to Pietrasanta, I immediately feel a change come over me. I can stop ‘doing’ and instead begin to allow myself ‘to be.’” And from that, the art develops. ■

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