

## Print Article



Sudeley Castle in Gloucestershire



Lili Dent-Brocklehurst and son Luca with Damien Hirst's "Skinhedge" *Sensation* (2005) on the grounds of Sudeley Castle

## COURT GESTURES

### by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp

"Vertigo: New Commissions and Recent Works by Francis Alÿs, Ghada Amer, Keith Coventry, Katy Dove, Angus Fairhurst, Damien Hirst, Mariele Neudecker, Duncan Marquiss, Petroc Sesti and Franz West," June 19-Oct. 3, 2005, at Sudeley Castle, Winchcombe, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire GL54 5JD England

For Mollie Dent-Brocklehurst and her brother Henry Dent-Brocklehurst, who grew up at Sudeley Castle in the Cotswold Hills in England, the past was a constant present. A Van Dyke painting in the living room, a Greuze in the den, a Stubbs in the billiard room. Thanks to the acquisitive inclinations of the Dent-Brocklehurst Victorian ancestors, every room is crowded with lovely pictures and rare furniture. The quadrangular stone castle, originally built in the 12th century by John de Sudeley, once belonged to Henry VIII, was visited by Elizabeth I and almost ruined by Cromwell during the Civil War. The Dent-Brocklehurst association dates from the 19th century and most of the present interior was determined by Lady Elizabeth Ashcombe, who is Henry and Mollie's mother, and her husband Lord Harry Ashcombe.

The castle is also a home, one that I have visited many times due to the close friendship of my husband, David Philp, with Henry and his wife Lili. During Henry and Lili's spring wedding or the occasional winter pheasant shoot, I have taken pleasant walks around the extensive grounds and gardens. This summer, however, the parterre rose gardens were joined by something new, something very new: "Vertigo," an exhibition of sculpture and installations organized by Anne de Charmant, curator of the Meadow Gallery in Worcestershire, and Mollie Dent-Brocklehurst, who is director of Gagolian Gallery in London. The show continues until Oct. 3, 2005.

Mollie asked a select group of contemporary artists to respond to the history, the architecture and the grounds. She was not there when we visited Sudeley this summer but I was fascinated by her project. Damien Hirst -- the best-known artist in the show -- installed what he called a "skinhedge": a huge cross-section of the human dermis showing layers of fat, follicles and shafts of hair the size of cornstalks. It stands taller than Henry's wife, a former fashion model who is not a wee lass, and brings back memories of grade-school biology text books. As usual, the artist has made something bizarre and off-putting, this time in a sylvan glade, a wedge of humanness in answer to manicured hedges. Yet, like much of Hirst's work, it has stayed in my memory for months. And, it was a big hit with Henry and Lili's young sons Mark and Luca, both under the age of four.

Franz West also made a big impression on the kids with his giant drooping banana and egg shapes in white metal that were installed near the castle tower where ghosts can be seen and felt. Really. I've stayed in that wing of the castle and felt them myself. Maybe West did too



One of Franz West's 2 *Larven* with (from left to right) David Philp, Henry Dent-Brocklehurst, Mark Dent-Brocklehurst and Vidal Sassoon



Ghada Amer's *Happily Ever After* on the grounds of Sudeley Castle

because he visualized them floating under an ancient yew tree.

In one of the many gardens surrounding the castle, Ghada Amer was commissioned to create a work. She invented a folly, a circular armature covered in flowers and spelling out "Happily Ever After," a natural association with this fairy tale locale.

In the dungeons, where not too long ago a man could be imprisoned for stealing a sheep, there was an extremely compelling sculpture by Petroc Sesti, a whirlpool within a vat of paraffin that radiated silvery reflections around the darkened interior.

Sudeley Castle is open to the public during the summer and receives over 100,000 visitors. Usually, they come to see the Elizabethan knot garden, the Queens Garden with its masses of roses, and the church housing the tomb of Katherine Parr, Henry VIII's last queen -- not works by artists like Mariele Neudecker, Angus Fairhurst and Francis Alÿs.

According to Mollie, about ten percent of this year's visitors came to see the contemporary art. "Ideally, this is an ongoing project at Sudeley," she says. "We wanted to engage a new generation of artists whom you would not ordinarily associate with working in this kind of setting. We have had a terrific response to the show. About ten percent of the visitors (when asked) have come specifically for the exhibition. Of course, some people don't understand the work, but on the whole I have tried to install the exhibition with a level of sensitivity to visitors who are coming for the more traditional experience."

Mollie's brother Henry, co-owner of the castle, does not always share her enthusiasm for contemporary art. In fact, with his childhood friend Henry Birtels, he contributed his own "sculpture" by driving a series of broken billiard cues into the ground and topping them off with someone's underpants (clean). They were devastated to be found out, their creation dismantled before the glamorous opening reception.

The arguments about historic preservation always come back to how important it is to keep a building alive. It seems that just as their mother turned the castle into a home, the current owners of Sudeley have embraced their history and are now in the process of adding to it. Why not contemporary art at Sudeley? After all, Damien Hirst recently bought a house in Gloucestershire. There goes the neighborhood. Up. Up. Up.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP is author of *Full Bloom: The Art and Life of Georgia O'Keeffe*, published by W.W. Norton.



Petroc Sesti's *Event Horizon* in the Sudeley Castle dungeon



Mariele Neudecker's *One Thing Leads to Another* (2005) on the grounds of Sudeley Castle



Angus Fairhurst's *Untouched* (2005) on the grounds of Sudeley Castle