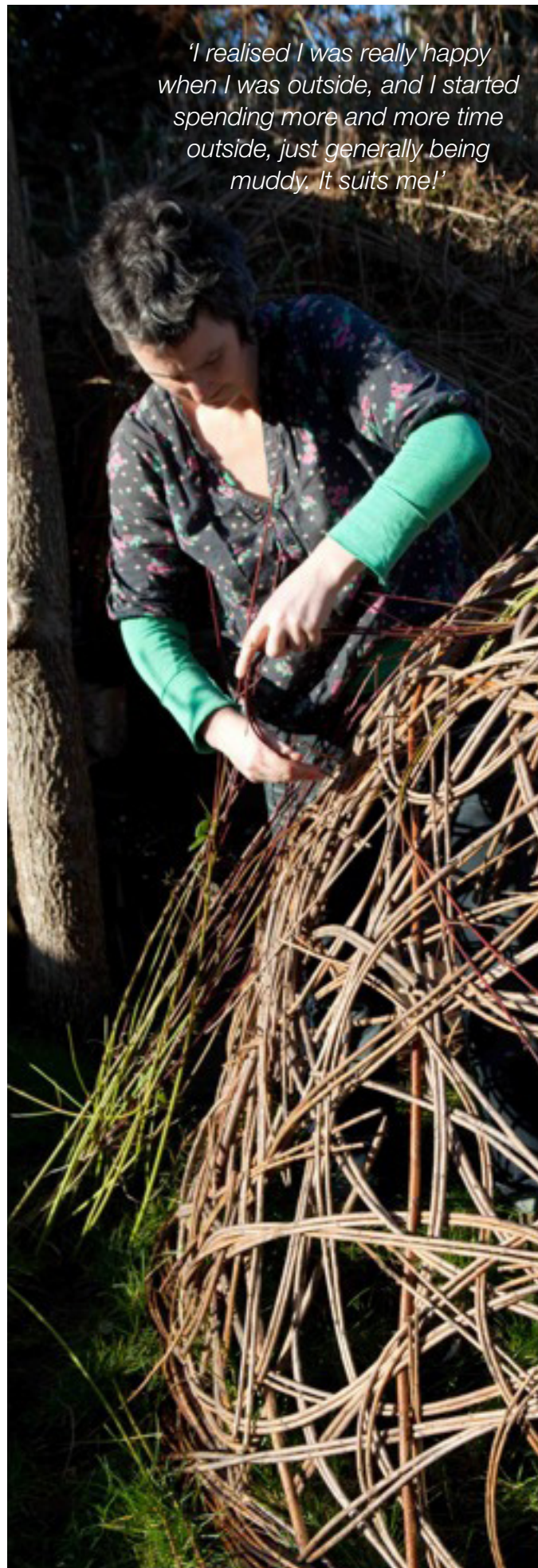


# Meet the makers

Victoria Regan meets Sussex basketmaker Annemarie O'Sullivan and talks willow, corn dollies and the joys of getting muddy

Walking into Annemarie O'Sullivan's improbably light and airy house from an ordinary suburban street is surprising enough, and that's not to mention the panoramic view of rolling green countryside that greets the eye from her back garden. I get the feeling that I have discovered an oasis of calm; something extraordinary hidden amongst the everyday. As I sit down I see that Annemarie's baskets are displayed all around us in a fantastic array of skill, ranging from large, hooped gypsy baskets to intricate woven work and netting made from balls of glinting copper wire. A postcard catches my eye, which features a full-sized corn dolly Jesus on a crucifix overlooking the sea; a weaving project on a truly awesome scale. 'I think what I love about that is that somebody was obsessed' laughs Annemarie. 'Because the technique is mesmerising.'



*'I realised I was really happy when I was outside, and I started spending more and more time outside, just generally being muddy. It suits me!'*



This sense of concentration to the point of preoccupation is very relevant to Annemarie's craft, for when I ask her where her urge to make things came from, she says: 'I used to be a swimmer and I feel there's some real link between the two. I get totally immersed. There's something slightly obsessive in it. I used to dream I was swimming down the road, everywhere I went.' This drive for a creative and physical outlet led her to take a one-day workshop in basketmaking, which left her hooked, but it was the shortage of classes that really galvanised her commitment to learn more. 'If it had been on my doorstep and really easy to do I might not have done it. I had to work really hard to find classes, but when I did, I was so inspired.' Whilst basketmaking as a craft is as old as time, obtaining the materials required is not as easy as it used to be due to a shortage of suitable willow. As Annemarie says, 'There are very few basketmakers now who have learned as apprentices, and most of the willow growers are retiring and no-one's taking over'. Characteristically undaunted, she tells me about her plans to revive willow-growing in her local area, hiking through the countryside using old Ordnance Survey maps as a guide to finding forgotten osier beds (places where willows are grown for basketmaking).

I ask Annemarie to tell me more about how she discovered her passion for basketmaking. 'I was a primary school teacher and I started doing lots of outdoor workshops' she says. 'I realised I was really happy when I was outside, and I started spending more and more time outside, just generally being muddy. It suits me!' Her sense of enthusiasm for nature is palpable: 'Every time I go out on the Downs, I come home with pockets full of little bits of scraps of things that I've twisted'. We talk about how she sources the wood for her basketmaking, and she tells me that now she is becoming known, she is sometimes contacted by people with bundles of willow and hazel going spare. Smaller basketry material is harder to find however. 'It's easier to go and scavenge dogwood and little bits



of willow, but it takes quite a lot of sorting as it needs to be very uniform. I might need a hundred rods that are the same thickness and the same length. It's very time-consuming.' It sounds like a lot of work – does she have any helpers? 'Yes, I always bring my children with me for cover just in case I get caught!' she laughs.

Her level of commitment to her work is really striking, and it's inspiring to be in the company of someone who seems to have found their vocation so wholeheartedly. Annemarie runs courses on basketmaking and teaches both adults and children, and I wonder if this is another way of protecting the heritage of the craft that has so enthralled her. 'As soon as I became a competent maker, I realised there were so many people who wanted to learn' she tells me. 'The teaching feels like a really important aspect of my work because I'm interested in the historical thread.' She regrets the lack of apprenticeship opportunities available to would-be basketmakers these days, and we talk about the exquisite level of skill that can be achieved by spending a long period of time apprenticed to an established maker. 'I've had small bits of teaching from quite a few different people and a lot of my own finding out', she explains, 'so a lot of things have been self-taught, which I realise is how people have made things in the past. People found what was outside their doorstep and they made it fit their use.' I'm curious about how easy it is for a beginner to learn basketmaking – does she get many students who are naturals at it? 'Some people just have a feel,' she tells me. 'Last year I had a retired builder come to me, he made the most amazing basket. Because he'd been working with his hands and working with materials since he was a teenager, he immediately understood the tension. It's all about understanding the material. I always say it's a bit like playing with a plastic ruler. You have to understand the tension and feel when it's about to go too far, and pull back.'



Annemarie tells me about some of her influences, and cites the book 'Waterlog' by environmentalist Roger Deakin as a big inspiration. It tells the story of its author's quest to swim wild throughout Britain, and I can immediately see how this would chime with Annemarie's instinctive enthusiasm for the outdoors and the freeing effects of being in nature. Other influences are basketmakers Mary Butcher and Tim Johnson ('he makes bundles of things; his work is just gorgeous'), and French culture, in which life seems to be much closer to the source of everything. As Annemarie says: 'In every town you see somebody who makes baskets, somebody who fixes roofs'.

I ask Annemarie about other people's reactions to her work, and she tells me that often people look at her baskets and ask 'What's it for?' 'Now I always name my baskets', she smiles. It seems to me that those who aren't confident using basketry for many and various purposes are missing a trick, as I look around and see a whole range of fantastic baskets being used for both practical and decorative purposes.

Looking to the future, Annemarie is currently creating a willow bower for the garden of a National Trust property, Standen, and has recently completed another large-scale work, making a family of deer in the snowy grounds of Wakehurst Place. Closer to home, a handsome new studio is being built in her back garden, an update to the 'damp hovels' Annemarie tells me basketmakers traditionally worked in to keep their materials fresh. Her enthusiasm for her craft is truly infectious, and we coo over a wonderful 1950s Chinese basket in her collection; a charity shop-find that is a marvel of construction. I get a sense from Annemarie of the joyfulness of making, and the happiness that can be found through absorption in a craft. 'I have to be making something', says Annemarie. 'It's a complete need.'

*To find out more about Annemarie's work or to book courses, visit [www.annemarieosullivan.co.uk](http://www.annemarieosullivan.co.uk)*