# *Sculpting Lives* podcast transcript

## Series 2, Episode 4: Alison Wilding

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Sarah Turner: And it's absolutely right that artists, particularly of her generation, resist being pigeonholed as somehow, outliers or struggling because what matters is the work that they did do.

Sarah Turner: Welcome to Sculpting Lives with me, Sarah Turner.

Jo Baring: And me Jo Baring.

Sarah Turner: So this episode is about the sculptor, Alison Wilding.

Jo Baring: This is so exciting. So we went to Alison's studio to interview her and we also went to various exhibitions to speak to people who've worked with Alison. Alison is really interesting. She went to Art School in the 60s and 70s. She's a Royal Academician. She's been twice nominated for the Turner Prize. But the thing about Alison is that people always say, it's impossible to talk about her work really, isn't it?

Sarah Turner: And that's a little bit of a problem for us when we are doing a sculpture podcast where words about sculpture, about sculptural practices are at the heart of this. But I think that is really interesting. And we sort of grappled with that, with a number of our interviewees asking them how do we talk about sculpture? How do we find the words to describe it? What is sculpture's language? Why is that important? So these are all of the things that we really get to the heart of with our contributors.

Jo Baring: We do, we really enjoy a challenge don't we, Sarah?

Sarah Turner: We do!

Jo Baring: But one of the first people that we asked was Tom Rowland, who is the managing director of Karsten Schubert Gallery in Soho. And early on in the summer we went to visit him in the noisy Soho streets.

Sarah Turner: Yeah, it was just getting going again, wasn't it? After lockdown people going back into galleries, going out and about. And we went to an exhibition of Alison's work called, *Mesmer, Again* which was held in Room 2 in a really wonderful, 18th-century building full of rickety, old floorboards.

Tom Rowland: Well, we're standing in a 18th-century apartment on the second floor in Lexington Street. The room itself is relatively untouched. There are bare floorboards, a floor bows from front to back, assume there's probably, literally a tree under there. It's dipped over time. We have a light space in the front of the building and a dark space at the back. And for this show, for Alison Wilding's Mesmer, Again, we have her sculpture in the front space which is the light space and then smaller, more intimate works on tabletops and on the walls in the smaller space at the back of the apartment.

Jo Baring: Can you describe the sculpture that we're looking at? This is a floor based piece, isn't it?

Tom Rowland: So the work is largely comprised of wood and it's held together by magnets. The magnetism goes across and then Alison's used three types of wood in this sculpture. There's some found elements to it too as well as added elements like these circles, for example, are the bases of quiche tins. And they provide a joint between the two V-sections. And there are magnets embedded in the timber that stick to metal surfaces too.

Sarah Turner: What I've noticed that whilst you've been standing here as well and moving around the room is that the sculpture moves and there's a slight wobble to it, like it's responding to its environment and its situation. Was that something that you discussed with Alison about the situation of this piece here?

Tom Rowland: Absolutely. I mean, I think Alison really believes that, I mean, it sounds obvious, but what's essential to looking at sculptures is, literally, looking at it. And when this was made in the studio, she was struggling or trying to negotiate joining this piece. And part of an accident, if you like, was that one of the legs was lifted from the floor which she actually liked and bringing it here for the first time. Once it's installed it does move as the floor moves. But actually it's very solid there and it's in a great position for viewers who have to walk around it.

Jo Baring: Okay. So we've moved into the second room of the exhibition which, as you say, is much darker. So we've moved out of the sunlight into the north facing, much darker room. So can you tell us about what's in here?

Tom Rowland: So the room is much smaller and we have table-based pieces, some wall pieces, and some drawings from Alison. The cabinet which has been here for a while now, which has its own history, is lit. And inside are some smaller alabaster pieces that Alison's made and some things from her own collection. There's a megalodon tooth in there and some fossils, some neolithic arrowheads. The megalodon tooth is 10 million years old. It's interesting that in the context of Alison's work, perhaps, that these things are made, are formed from the earth and her work, I think, the way she puts things together is, it's not planned. These things come together.

Jo Baring: So we're here in your studio, Alison. It's incredibly kind of you to have us here, thank you so much. Perched on a table amongst lots of objects and instruments and various things. We have come from your exhibition at Karsten Schubert, Mesmar, Again and I wonder if we can start off by you telling us a little bit about that exhibition?

Alison Wilding: Room 2 is a very domestic space as you would've realised. I think it's one of the only original places, probably, in Soho which is now being turned into some high-end shopping quarter. But there's something about Lexington street that has stayed the same and the building that Andrew Edmunds owns is case in point. And I just think Room 2 has got this lovely, just scruffiness. Which is really, really unusual.

Sarah Turner: It's like going back in time, isn't it in that building?

Alison Wilding: Yes. When you go up the stairs that are sort of dirty and everything is... Paint's not cleaned up. I kind of-

Jo Baring: And the quite dodgy electrics, aren't there? As you're going up.

Alison Wilding: I think so.

Jo Baring: But that's interesting, actually, in terms of history and memory, thinking about the objects that you've layered within the exhibition, particularly, actually that cabinet. So you brought some of your own personal objects into the exhibition as well?

Alison Wilding: Yes. We had a, well, I had a bit of a problem with all the furniture in there because a lot of it is stashed in the bathroom which is at the end that you probably didn't go into. But the cabinet had to stay. And so

we thought it would be good to put some stuff in it. And I thought I would bring, I think there are maybe one or two very small bits of sculpture, but some other things that I've just collected over the years. I suppose you want me to describe them?

Sarah Turner: Well, Bristols and we noticed this decor.

Alison Wilding: Well, it's a very particular crystal actually and lots of crystal spheres that I bought when Gregory Bottley and Lloyd, which was a very famous geological shop in Brompton road. They went out of business, they moved to Dover then they went out of business about, I don't know, eight, 10 years ago. Everything in their holdings was auctioned in Canterbury. And so I put a load of bids in for stuff because it's where I bought a meteorite once and various tech tights and all sorts of stuff. And so I didn't get all my bids but I got about 25 of these really beautiful crystal spheres, all different. Some are really enormous, some are really very small and they're just utterly gorgeous. So some of those are in the cabinet and I hope no one's nipped anything.

Jo Baring: Sarah loves her crystals so we kept an eye on her.

Sarah Turner: Yeah. And I read that you also mudlark on the tens.

Alison Wilding: Yeah.

Sarah Turner: And that idea of scavenging, going down into the layers of history seems to be something that wanders through your work.

Alison Wilding: Oh I just absolutely love mudlarking, it's just the most brilliant thing to do. I think my mudlarking started as a child when we used to go to Southwold for our summer holidays. And on the beach, that's where you could find agates and carnelians, which I've got a whole, big jar full. And you just have to get your iron and you catch them because the carnelian will glow with a particular light when the sun's in the right place or there's water on it. And agates are much harder to find, but really special. And I've just loved that thing of, guessing your eye and picking out some really weird stuff. I've never found anything amazing, mudlarking, but yeah, bits and pieces.

Sarah Turner: Yeah. I just love that sense that London's history, it's just there being washed by the tide and it comes in and comes out and it's just there meandering through the city.

Alison Wilding: It's just a beautiful place to be as well because you are not on the land and you're not quite in the river. It's just on the edge and it's so nice.

Sarah Turner: I love that London sounds different down there, doesn't it? Because that tinkle on the foreshore and it's submerged a little bit from the street level.

Alison Wilding: Different noises.

Sarah Turner: Yeah.

Alison Wilding: Even if you don't find anything, I usually go to a particular friend and we always have lunch. It's like sitting on a beach sometimes. It's just glorious.

Sarah Turner: And a pint in the black fryers afterwards, is not a bizarre routine.

Alison Wilding: If that's where you go. Yeah.

Sarah Turner: See, we're being secretive about our mudlarking, yeah.

Jo Baring: I love that about what you were just saying, about being on the edge or that place in between because it was a [inaudible 00:10:50] area which you seem to inhabit, not only obviously on the river, but in here, in the work, that kind of in between space. I wonder if we could delve into that a little bit more?

Alison Wilding: In between space. It's very hard to articulate that but I think I know what you mean. I've always been interested in the edges, the things, the boundaries. And I think that's why the shoreline, whether it's the river or the sea is so interesting because it's just so fugitive and so fluid and it's something that you can't really pin down. I think I like the idea that a work can hold an ever enlarging space but where it no longer holds and where it does, it's not visible. It's just something that you sense.

Jo Applin: For Alison, I think that what fascinates me is her insistence on the question of edges and boundaries with her sculpture and the idea of territory, the territory it can hold. And I think that the space that a sculpture can hold is very complicated and it changes. And I think that in the same way that language can be slippery and quite hard to hang onto when we're talking about sculpture. And I think particularly Alison's sculpture, I think it kind of evades language in quite difficult ways. It's hard to put into words.

Sarah Turner: That's the voice of Jo Applin, professor of Art History at the court hold Institute of Art who's written the first critical survey on Alison Wilding's work. Jo says that she's had to search hard to find the words to

describe Alison's sculpture. And we asked her to accept that challenge, to try and capture Alison's sculpture in words for us.

Jo Applin: It's hard to experience. It might be on the floor, she's based small pieces on the wall, some sit on table tops. It throws you off immediately. You're disoriented and you're not quite sure what it is you are looking at or being asked to do with this sculptural encounter. And it strikes me every single time I encounter a work by Alison's. What are we to do with this? How should I navigate it? How am I going to describe it? What's it trying to do? And this idea of it having poorest edges and boundaries is something that I always think about with her work. And I think it is the question of balance or imbalance between things, soft, hard, liquid solid, light, dark. These are things that she plays with, a lot of sculptors do, but she does something quite extraordinary with those terms, I think.

Jo Applin: And the question of them being a trap. I think it's a visual trap because as you walk around them, you're like, "Oh, oh, oh." And you might look at a balloon and think it's a balloon and it's not a balloon, it's being cast. And she plays with the idea of what you think you are looking at and the limits of what we can know about an object that unfolds as you navigate. So the object and subject indulge in quite a complicated dance with each other. It keeps changing and that's why it's so hard to pin down.

Sarah Turner: Another thing that we wanted to explore with you as well is about the languages of abstraction that Wilding uses in her sculpture and these sort of, really part of her sculptural language, her vocabulary, and using those abstract forms. Do you think that's part of some of this difficulty or this complexity that we are dancing around here?

Jo Applin: Yeah, I do. I think that this idea of her having her own sculptural vocabulary is absolutely right and it's idiosyncratic, it's entirely her own. And so she's immediately one foot to you because there isn't an obvious lineage or set of comparisons that one might make. I mean, you can. You can always search for peer group comparisons or where she might fit in a longer historical trajectory. But there's something utterly idiosyncratic to the way in which she thinks in abstract terms, that is for me, one of the most rewarding things about her work. How do you engage with this? And for me, as a teacher, as well as a writer, how am I going to convey this to students?

Jo Applin: And how am I going to encourage them in turn to write about these works? And the selecting, just not some words, but the right words, is part of the challenge in making something come alive or to making it mean in the ways that you want to and I think that the works are so brilliantly resistant to anything like a straightforward reading or having

meaning that you could readily attach that that is part of their challenge because instead they get you in the guts, don't they? And there's something very visceral about her work, that evades language, it kind of evades history. I don't know, were they made in the '60s or were they made in the 20s? Are they recent works? There's something deeply ahistorical about these works, the forms that she's working with. I think.

Jo Baring: They do really wrong foot you, don't they? I love that idea. There's a very famous facts exchange, isn't there, between Alison and [Philider 00:15:56] in which they really talk about the impossibility of articulating what sculpture is and saying that sculpture isn't one plus one equals two. Philider says one plus one equals three. So potentially, is that something we can talk about in relation to what you said about getting to the heart of Alison's work and being unable to, or her unwillingness to allow us to identify what's going on?

Jo Applin: Yeah, absolutely. And there's something to do with time attached to that as well, isn't there? There's an unfolding that has to happen that is resisted at every turn. You have to look quite slowly at Alison's work. And I think with Philider's as well, that wrong foots you. There's an absurdity at the heart of this too which I think can be, I don't know, funny but I think it's much more dead pan and existential at moments than that, particularly, in Alison's work that you feel somehow on the back foot with what it is you are looking at and what it is that you are engaging with. And I think this one plus one equals three is like there's an excess there.

Jo Applin: And that excess is in the field of the visual, not the language. It does evade expression in words. And this is something that is said so many times about Alison's work that becomes a bit of a truism, "Oh it's really hard to write about. Oh, it's so hard to find the words." But it's sort of.... and thinking on my way here today, "Oh, how would you describe one of her works? How are you going to make it come to life for somebody who's listening and not standing next to you in a gallery?" And I think it is part of what makes them so wonderful and unique as objects, is that you do need to be there. You do need to somehow experience it. Again, something we say about all kinds of work but it's really true of hers. I think that invading language and so what we do is we scramble for a language and in that we get close to the heart of things, I think, but through very different roots.

Sarah Turner: Can we talk to you about the longer history of being a sculptor and how that happened, how it started really?

Alison Wilding: How did it start? Well, I suppose it started up at Art School. In my foundation, it wasn't really called that, it was called Pre Dip, which is in

Nottingham. It was a really good traditional course where you did six weeks of all sorts of things like printing, painting, drawing, 3-D work. And almost everyone in my year, they were painters, actually, that's not true, not all of them, but a lot of them were painters and they seemed really sophisticated. And I'd come from a school where the art that we... was a joke actually. We were sitting at easels and not allowed to speak, that sort of thing. And nothing like the art that kids do at school these days. So I was completely lost with all these people at Nottingham who knew all about masking tape and hard edge.

Alison Wilding: And I think I was floundering in a way. And then I went into the plaster room which was also used by people on the Dip AD course. And no one else was in there apart from the tutor and a couple of students from that course and everything really changed. And I think I fell into something that I would have described as my own language that I could make up all the rules. I could actually do what I wanted and I made a terrible mess of everything but it was definitely how it all started. I went from there to Ravensbourne (College), to do a Dip AD, it was still called Dip AD then. And that was absolutely brilliant because the sculpture school was... We were all in these huts in the campus, it was just grass. Acres and acres of grass.

Alison Wilding: So we worked outside pretty well all the time. And I was on a year that was amazingly competitive. We used to start at seven o'clock in the morning and we would stay until we were thrown off. And that went on, I think, for three years. It was absolutely amazing. I don't know, in some ways the best experience of being at Art School. And then I went to the Royal College, which was very, very different. Also very competitive and I was the only woman in my year, so it was a totally male dominated place. And Professor Bernard Meadows didn't really like girls. He liked secretaries, I think, but he didn't really like female students very much.

Sarah Turner: Did that put you off? Did you think, "Oh god, what have I done here?" Or did it make you-

Alison Wilding: No, he was just fantastically intimidating.

Jo Baring: So you were the only woman on the sculpture course?

Alison Wilding: I was the only woman in my year. There were two girls in the year above and there were no women in the third year when I was there. And there were no women tutors.

Jo Baring: And how did that make you feel? So as a young woman you were growing, did you ever doubt yourself pursuing a career as a sculptor in that environment?

Alison Wilding: No, I was like one of the boys that was the only way I could deal with it really.

Jo Baring: We like nothing more than a little field trip on sculpting live don't we, Sarah? And we went down to the New Art Centre at Roche Court to speak to one of my personal sculpture heroines, Madeleine Bessborough. Madeleine has been working in sculpture for, I dare say nearly, I think 60 years. She set up the New Art Centre in 1958 and has had a long relationship with Alison. We spoke to her about Alison's work and how she considers Alison in the context of British sculpture. And we also caught up with the director there, Jessica Smith, to tell us a little bit more about Alison's work in context.

Madeline Bespra: Alison, I admire as a sculptor more than anyone. I think she's got integrity. I think she's got an astounding capacity to produce beautiful, delicate things in rather harsh materials. And she's very private as a person but has very high standards.

Jessica Smith: We're in the Stable Gallery where we have got lithographs of Barbara Hepworth on display which are here because we represent the estate of Barbara Hepworth and are also supporting the retrospective which is on at the moment of the Hepworth Wakefield. So to celebrate that we have decided to hang these lithographs from a series, which the Tate and the VNA also own work from.

Jo Baring: It's amazing. There are so many connections because thinking about the people that were profiling in this series, there's Veronica Ryan, who has obviously got an installation at Hepworth Wakefield at the moment. But within this display of Hepworth lithographs, we are looking at a piece by Alison Wilding and Alison's had quite a long relationship with the New Art Centre hasn't she?

Jessica Smith: She has and I think her and Madeline go back some time. We are looking at the work, Baby Hum, which is from 2001, which is iron effectively. It's drop forged iron rather, and aluminium.

Jo Baring: So for our listeners, can you just explain a bit perhaps about the scale texture?

Jessica Smith: It's interesting actually, to be able to talk about something that needs you to really view it, but to describe it is very difficult for Alison's work because she deliberately avoids explanation. But we're standing by the window, the sun's streaming in and Baby Hum is in front of us. It's something one could almost hold in one's hand. This aluminium balances on a ball of iron. And it's her work from 2001. These are very

small but incredibly potent sculptures. They have entirely their own language and stand very much independently.

Jo Baring: I love that word, potent, that you used to describe them. It's very much as we're looking at this, as you say, it's just a small piece that you could hold in your hands. So an iron ball with stepped aluminium balanced on the top but it does feel almost telesmanic, doesn't it? In a way there's a real power and energy to it.

Jo Baring: So let's think about her, Sarah, in terms of what else is going on in sculpture at that time. So how do you go about placing someone like Alison Wilding?

Sarah Turner: Yeah, I think that's an interesting question, Jo, and it's a bigger one for us as well as we're thinking about the careers of individuals but within their networks of profession and practise. And in a way Alison's work has often been discussed in terms of a new generation of sculpture. That was a label that was used to describe a group of sculptors who came to prominence in the 1980s. She had her first major UK solo exhibition in 1985 at the Serpentine Gallery in London. But again, I think we have to ask these questions, how do we write about women artists? Where are they placed and do these histories serve their work and their career as well?

Jo Applin: I actually felt that to keep her just in that bracket of a certain generation and group of artists, largely men, was not giving her work the due justice actually. And I think that it's part of its historical moment and journey but I don't think it's all there is to say about her work. I don't think this is work simply in conversation with her immediate peers in London. So she came to prominence, particularly, through her solo exhibition at the Serpentine in 1985. And I guess in exhibition history, that's pinpointed as her arrival onto the scene and has often been seen as part of this new generation of sculptors alongside people like Antony Gormley would be part of that generation. What is it particularly, maybe with sculpture, but not exclusively, about this need to categorise and organise into these groups. Even if artists, like you are saying, like Wilding, don't really fit into them or they're not self-organised into these groups they put into them.

Jo Applin: I mean, it's one of the first things we try and tell students, isn't it? It's a helpful shorthand, but it doesn't really get you very far. Most artists, very few artists agree to the labels or groups that they're afforded. They become a way of tidying up history, of giving us a neatness to a particular moment. And I suppose if you work hard to think about what shared characteristics there were with that group, there's a playfulness with materials and expansion of the materials and the categories and

the spatial organisation of form, a play between figuration and abstraction. But that's true for many other moments in the history of art. And I think it's to do with the retrospective narrative and perhaps a resistance to the monograph and thinking about one artist as a siloed voice on their own.

Jo Applin: But for me, the attention that this long form piece of writing on Alison's work allowed me was really revelatory and I think for others as well. To take the time to look at this extraordinary and actually quite diverse body of work, even though at the same time, there's this language that runs through it. As you said, these motifs, these recurring motifs and formal strategies that she employs. But I think that to understand her work as standing apart from the moment of its origin is really key because she's still continuing to work in quite extraordinary ways now.

Jo Baring: That really, actually, links into a discussion around her reluctance to think about biography and gender as well when discussing the work. Do you think that, or in your conversations with her, did gender ever come up as an issue or something that she felt fed into the work?

Jo Applin: Ah, it's such an interesting question. So it's such a difficult and thorny topic for artists who are women, obviously, to start out by saying, "I was the only woman in my studio at the time at Art School, everyone was basically sexist. It was hard for me to get a footing." It's such a classic and familiar story yet at the same time, it tells us very little about the work.

Jo Applin: And I think when you are engaged with abstraction, it's so important that your work be considered on those terms. And I think that she's absolutely right to resist the reading of her work as in any way feminised or feminist. These are not feminist works. They're not about feminism. That doesn't mean she's not feminist or that there isn't a serious political commitment in her life but to try and seek that out in the work is just wrongheaded, I think. And it's absolutely right that artists, particularly of her generation resist being pigeon holders, somehow, outliers or struggling because what matters is the work that they did do. But that they encountered the sexist art world and it was harder for them? Yes. And in a way that's for us to say maybe not them.

Sarah Turner: So in a way you're saying that we've got to take the artwork on its own terms at the same time as revealing the structures of sexism, which have operated around those works and which these artists have had to-

Jo Applin: Right. Well, it's to do with how you come into visibility and how you don't. I mean, just as a thought experiment, it would be interesting to

do it with that artists who are men, wouldn't it? To think about the domestic arrangements they were entangled in at the time of making something or the point at which they did or didn't have children or the point at which they did or didn't have representation or exposure. We just don't tend to do that. So I think there's something specific around the language and the narrative that develops around artists who are women that needs challenging and placing under pressure. And I think that it's only right that we do that. And I think that that's a feminist approach in itself.

Sarah Turner: Thank you to all the contributors to this episode in particular, the sculptor, Alison Wilding and also Tom Rowland, Jo Applin, Madeline Bespra and Jessica Smith. If you want to look at any of the images we've discussed in this episode, have a look at our Instagram feed, @Sculpting Lives.

Jo Baring: Join us next time for an episode on Cathy Pilkington.

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