After 1,500 applications, eight selection panels including 29 expert judges and 12 finalists, there could only be one winner, with clay artist Phoebe Cummings taking home the £10,000 prize. But who would have won your vote? After all, it’s the eclecticism that is the most startling element of the first Woman’s Hour Craft Prize. The show runs the gamut of materials and techniques, from Laura Ellen Bacon’s architecturally scaled willow weaving to the small but beautiful darned interventions of Celia Pym. But as surprising is the range of subject matter on display. There’s a nod to conceptual art in Emma Woffenden’s disturbing figures, for instance, while others, most notably Peter Marigold and Caren Hartley, probably consider themselves to belong at the more functional, maybe even industrial, design end of the creative dial.

Cummings’ work investigates time – her raw clay fountain slowly dissolved throughout the duration of the exhibition at the V&A, leaving only fragments of its existence – yet I suspect Andrea Walsh’s beautifully reserved boxes will become future heirlooms for generations to treasure. And then there are pieces with a point to make: Lin Cheung’s pin badge, for example, is a clear reference to last year’s EU referendum, while Neil Brownsword’s Factory installation explores the slow death of Stoke-on-Trent’s hard-fought, indigenous skills.

And it spans the generations too, with established names including Alison Britton and Romilly Saumarez Smith sitting alongside makers whose careers are beginning to gather momentum such as Laura Youngson Coll.

What does all this say about the current state of British craft? I would posit that it’s in reasonably rude health. This is a strong, confident-looking line-up. One caveat, though. There has been an extraordinary explosion of interest in making over the past decade – the joint Crafts Council and V&A exhibition Power of Making, for instance, attracted over 300,000 people in 2011 (surprising both institutions I suspect) and craft-based shows increasingly fill our TV schedules – but it’s currently possible for a pupil to go through the British education system without playing with a lump of clay or learning to sew. If we want to continuing producing the quality of the makers on display here, then that situation surely has to change.
Laura Ellen Bacon, a sculptor whose career has been inextricably linked with willow weaving, has a confession to make. ‘This isn’t something I’m proud of, but I’ve never really made a full basket in my life,’ she says. ‘I’ve half-made three but never completed them. I guess I didn’t want to do something that already exists.’

Instead, she’s taken this traditional material and used it to create extraordinary, often site-specific, structures that appear to seep out of buildings – such as Blackwell, the Arts and Crafts house in Cumbria and the New Art Centre in Wiltshire – or occasionally engulf them and possess an uncanny sense of movement. The artist herself has compared her pieces to parasites, leeching off other structures – at their best they’re ever so slightly macabre. The antecedents of her craft can be traced back to a childhood spent making dens. She was given her first hammer at the age of 12 and by 16 had created a tree-house 5m long by 5m high.

After doing a foundation at Chesterfield College, she studied applied arts at the University of Derby. She initially struggled, only truly finding her feet in her final year as she began making work from dogwood and hazel branches on a large scale, much as she did when she was growing up. When she couldn’t find any more branches, she began to buy bundles of willow instead. Yet, while she’s made her name with the material, she’s distinctly wary of being pigeonholed. ‘The reason I never say I’m a willow artist is partly because I’m beginning to use more materials, but also it puts the material first. It suggests I want to hone my continual skills in willow and find ways to use it. But the willow is secondary… I’m not being modest but I’m not particularly skilled with willow. I’ve developed a particular skill to create exactly what I want.’

As if to prove her point, for the Woman’s Hour Craft Prize she’s created a new work from Flanders Red willow, ‘about movement and vigour and trying to show how the material is being worked’. However, as a recent collaboration with furniture designer Sebastian Cox illustrated, she is always willing to experiment and her upcoming solo exhibition, at Sleaford’s National Centre for Craft and Design in October, will include her first experiments in thatch.
I’m very attached to the idea of containment; for me, it’s both psychological and the visual thing of that dark hollow,’ says Alison Britton, whose career as a ceramist and critic spans 40 years of making and writing. ‘Having an inside and an outside is very compelling. I explore that difference. Of course, there are all sorts of metaphors about the self.’

Britton’s love of clay started aged nine, at school: ‘I held a lump and it had so many possibilities in it at all stages.’ After a foundation at Leeds and a BA at the Central School of Art, in the early 1970s she completed an MA at the RCA, where she was a leading member of a group of radical ceramists challenging conventional notions of the material. That urge to confront and question is fundamental to her work, always combined with acute intellectual rigour. She constructs her pots from slabs rolled in shallow arcs, painting the surface and, more recently, pulling her fingers across the wet clay to create ridges. She coils the tops before firing, then pours the glaze from a jug. ‘I don’t really plan. I just let it happen to be somewhat unpredictable’, a spontaneity underpinned by a lifetime of making: ‘It is all about layering, a gradual process.’

Her early pots somehow made the 3D seem 2D: all had a strong graphic presence. Her newest work is much fuller and strangely anthropomorphic. For the prize she is showing Buoy, a fat, almost puffin-like jug, Core, where she has scored the surface with her fingers and Fieldwork, a rounder vessel that seems it is being pulled from a mass of clay, the surface decorated with graphic strokes. ‘I’m dealing with painting and sculpture in my work. I think about form as a sculptor (you have to move round the pot to understand the whole pot) and surface like a painter. In ceramics you can do both.’

She has had 50 solo exhibitions internationally with a first touring retrospective in 1990 and her latest, Content and Form, at the V&A last year. ‘I gained new strength from seeing my work from four decades together; it gave a sense of the changing journey. It was exciting how they bounced off each other.’

Britton is also an eminent curator and has tutored students at the Royal College of Art since 1984. She is one the foremost writers on art, craft and design, including a seminal book, Seeing Things: Collected Writing on Art, Craft and Design. For her, words are as important a medium as clay. However, the pot has been her main focus. ‘I have brought new ideas about form and the painted surface to its definition; thinking about function, history, capacity, containment and ornamentation as subjects to explore, and the layering of ambiguity across art and craft, the sculptural and the everyday.’

Corinne Julius

Globalisation and the loss of industrial knowledge in his home city of Stoke-on-Trent provide the backdrop to Neil Brownsword’s ceramic installation. Factory is a pared-down version of a major exhibition this award-winning artist opened in South Korea earlier this year.

As he points out, the tradition of China flower making is one of the few methods of mass production that relies completely upon the dexterity of the hand. So for this performative piece, Rita Floyd, one of the last of a generation of artisans that retain this skill, and her final apprentice Stacey Wright, re-enact their former working practices, providing, in Brownsword’s words, ‘an intimate space for the audience to witness the rhythmic intricacies of touch evident in their craft’.

He subsequently asks them to instantly discard the pieces they have just fashioned, creating a pile of waste that acts as a metaphor for the failure to protect (or find new use for) important industrial skills, or what the artist prefers to describe as our ‘intangible cultural heritage’.

Brownsword is steeped in the city’s history. He was born in Stoke-on-Trent and raised in Newcastle-under-Lyme, his family long connected to the pottery industry. After leaving school at 16, he worked for Wedgwood as an apprentice model-maker before moving into the company’s graphic design department. He decided to expand his horizons after being encouraged by his colleagues and did a foundation at his local college, going on to study ceramics at the University of Wales in Cardiff.

While there he began to produce sexually charged figurative pieces, collaged from casts taken from moulds, clay pipes and broken shards of ceramics. Subsequently, at the Royal College of Art, his work became less introverted and more satirical, using friends as subjects and taking inspiration from the likes of Ken Loach and Mike Leigh, before he began to turn his attention to the broader issues affecting Stoke itself. Determined to capture the history and spirit of a ceramic tradition facing extinction, he collected the detritus of the pottery-making process – off-cuts, imperfections, the stuff that’s left on the factory floor – and turned them into pieces in their own right.

Since the British Ceramics Biennial launched in 2009 he has become a mainstay, producing a short film, Marl Hole – with director Johnny Magee, charting what happened when a fistful of artists were left to play in a clay pit for five days – and initiating the Re-apprenticed project, where he learned new industrial skills from Stoke masters, and which, in many regards, has acted as a precursor to his current body of work. GG
By the age of 10, Lin Cheung had made cushions, curtains and bed linen for her own bedroom, using sewing skills inherited from her mother, but didn’t see craft as something you might make a living from. ‘My mum was very talented, but in our family craft skills were for fulfilling practical needs.’ The third daughter of Chinese parents from Hong Kong, Cheung was born in the UK and grew up in Wiltshire, where her father ran a Chinese take-away. It would take a BTEC National Diploma at the University of Southampton for her to realise that craft could be a career. ‘Visiting my metalwork teacher’s studio opened my eyes to a completely different way of life,’ she says. ‘I knew from that moment that I wanted to make things for a living.’

A book called *The New Jewelry: Trends and Traditions* by Peter Dormer and Ralph Turner, discovered during her BA in Wood, Metal, Ceramics and Plastics at the University of Brighton, focused that ambition into a desire to make jewellery. ‘Opening that book for the first time was profound,’ she explains. ‘The images were powerful and the work was technically incredible, but crucially, it was unlike any jewellery I had ever even imagined. It blew my mind.’

Brighton was also where Cheung developed her ideas-led approach. ‘When you talk to people about jewellery, they launch into memories and emotion before they talk about form or materials,’ she says. ‘It is deep in human nature to imbue objects with meaning.’ An MA in Goldsmithing, Silversmithing, Metalwork and Jewellery at the Royal College followed, and visiting lecturer Onno Boekhoudt opened her eyes to the potential scope of a jewellery artist. ‘It was like finding a spiritual home for my thinking and making,’ she says.

Today, Cheung’s making process is very direct and despite the advice she gives her students (she is a senior lecturer on the Jewellery and Textiles Programme at Central Saint Martins), she rarely sketches. ‘I just feel around, often working on a few ideas at a time, until a finished piece pops out,’ she says. It’s clearly a process that works – she has won an Arts Foundation Award (2001) and a Jerwood Contemporary Makers Award (2008) among many others, exhibited all over the world, and designed the London 2012 Paralympic Games medall.

She’s been shortlisted for the prize with *Delayed Reactions*, a series of politically motivated brooches exploring gemstone carving. The first piece in *Confused*, a pin badge made from blue lapis lazuli inlaid with gold stars depicting a bemused face. ‘I am not overtly political,’ Cheung says, ‘but following the EU referendum, I wanted to put all of my thoughts and feelings into a piece, just for me.’ Other brooches explore what pin badges say about the people who wear them. She says being shortlisted for the prize is the highlight of her career, but as for winning: ‘I couldn’t even imagine that.’ Katie Treggiden lincheung.co.uk
Phoebe Cummings is an artist and maker who deals in the ephemeral. Hand-built from raw clay, her work is designed to decay and ultimately disappear. "My pieces are made onsite and, wherever possible, I’ll recycle raw material. Usually they look at nature and landscape and how that has been interpreted through design, taking decorative arts and historic ceramics and then considering what meaning that might have in the present moment."

She initially trained at the University of Brighton on the 3D Design and Craft course, where she naturally gravitated towards ceramics. "I had a broad start," she says, "but the end clay was taking over. I think because it is so varied, and can do so many things. It felt like whatever my ideas were, clay kind of had a way of exploring them." Subsequently she did an MA at the Royal College of Art. However, it was when she fell into financial difficulties nine months after graduating in 2005 that she really hit her stride. She began to question both herself and her practice: "How am I going to keep doing this? Or should I be doing this? I wanted to make the work that I wanted to make. If I kept it raw then I could keep re-using the same material. Then by building onsite I could do without a studio – the only cost was time. It all started as a practical solution."

While on one level this might seem a sensible financial decision, on another it was extremely brave. After all, she was eschewing the conventional route of producing objects that are then sold through a shop or gallery. "The focus is more on the experience of objects, rather than a permanent thing," she says, when asked to characterise her practice. "I think it has been freeing. It gives you the chance to start over each time in some ways. But it’s more complicated in terms of selling. Instead, she has forged a career through commissions for public museums and galleries, including a residency at the V&A in 2010, where she first saw fragments of the (recently restored) Meissen fountain that has inspired her latest work.

For the prize she is making her own fountain that will dissolve as water drips through it over the duration of the show. It’s a piece, one imagines, that presents some difficulties when it comes to the subsequent tour? "I’ll film and photograph it," she laughs. "Then, hopefully, not everything will disappear and fragments of the original fountain will travel with some form of documentation." It might be a good idea to catch it while you can. GG
It was a sense of dissatisfaction that pushed Caren Hartley into handmade bicycle building. ‘It was kind of a slow evolution,’ she confesses. ‘I was making sculpture and public art, but I was finding I was spending a lot more time writing pitches and proposing for projects rather than making. So I was getting quite frustrated and sort of lost the love of it. In an attempt to avoid making a decision on her career, she spent time cycling around the capital and hanging out at the London Bike Kitchen, a not-for-profit organisation that teaches bicycle maintenance in Clerkenwell. ‘In the back of my head I was wondering what I was going to do if I didn’t want to do what I’d been training for over the past 10 years.’

She met Andrew Denham, founder of The Bicycle Academy, at Vulpine Summer Feit where she was volunteering with the London Bike Kitchen. ‘Through speaking to him I discovered there were people making bespoke bikes in London as a job. It hadn’t really occurred to me that people were still making bikes in the UK or that there was a bespoke industry.’ The seed was planted and she realised that this was an avenue she might want to explore. As she points out, the process combines ‘loving metal work, loving making and problem solving – the things that I liked’, and skills she had studied initially on the 3D Design, Metalwork and Jewellery course at the University College for the Creative Arts in Farnham and, subsequently, the Royal College of Art, where she came under the aegis of Hans Stofer.

She started helping out at workshops, before the London Bike Kitchen’s Jenni Gwiazdowski proposed to send her to the Academy if she then made her a bike. This in turn led to Hartley setting up her own studio, where she uses techniques that range from bronze brazing and silver soldering to piercing and wax carving.

So who wants a bespoke bike? ‘They are often good for people outside of the average,’ she explains. ‘So I tend to get a reasonable amount of shorter women and men. Once you get under 5ft 4in, it can be difficult to find a high-end bike. Things are pitched around an average man because that’s what you can sell more of, basically.’

For the prize Hartley will be exhibiting a bike she made for the Design Museum’s Cycle Revolution show in 2015. ‘It’s a functional bike,’ she says, ‘but it was also made for the exhibition. I kind of got to go to town on it.’ GG

hartleycycles.com
Arguably of all the makers on the Woman’s Hour Craft Prize shortlist, Peter Marigold’s work is the most eclectic. His output ranges from old school product design, such as the hefty Galvanised furniture series for British company SCP, to public art projects such as the 188m wall that’s just gone on site at Edinburgh’s new Royal Hospital for Sick Children, via material experimentations such as FORMcard, a credit card-sized piece of meltable bio-plastic that can be used to fix or adapt things, and crafted pieces such as the Dodai benches created from a Japanese Cypress log split in two. As he points out: ‘In the past, a designer would basically be attached to chairs or furniture of a certain scale. But now we’re in a position where different things happen.’

Making (combined with a wry sense of humour) has always played a key role in Marigold’s work. He initially studied sculpture at Central Saint Martins before starting a career making props, models and sets. In 2004 he enrolled on the Design Products course at the RCA, under the tutelage of Daniel Charny and Roberto Feo, and rapidly made a splash on graduating two years later with the Make/Shift shelving system – essentially a cluster of interlocking triangles that can expand to fit virtually any space without the need for fixings.

Since then, he has shared a studio space with old colleagues from the RCA as part of the increasingly influential OKAY collective, which includes the likes of Raw Edges and Hunting & Narud. His shortlisted piece, Tall Bleed Cabinet, has become something of a signature and is based around an interest in movement and decay. ‘Most of my work comes from mundane observations that I see all the time, wondering why they’re like that,’ he explains, ‘what it means and why certain things happen to certain materials. I’m really interested in the way the world breaks down.’ In this instance he became fascinated by the dripping lines created by nails rusting on fences he noticed as he walked around London. ‘You make something, you think your work is done but then nature kicks in and that process of change starts to occur,’ he says.

Using cedar tongue-and-groove cladding and steel nails, stripped of their zinc coating, the pieces are left outside and exposed to the elements – the tannin in the timber reacting with the metal to create the bleeding pattern. ‘They’re really about a man-made object being mortal, being reclaimed by nature,’ the designer concludes. GG

petermarigold.com
Celia Pym has raised the domestic craft of darning into an art form. Her beautifully repaired garments are often centred around grief, loss and tiny, but symbolic, acts of care. ‘Sometimes people give me an item that belonged to someone who has died,’ she explains. ‘Sometimes it’s a garment that got made by someone who died, or it’s just the thing they love the most and feel most comfortable in.’ By fixing them, she brings out a narrative in an everyday piece of clothing.

Her route to the prize has been circuitous. She initially studied sculpture at Harvard, before returning to the UK to train as a teacher. She taught for a couple of years, but kept a studio going at the same time and began to make increasing amounts of textile-based work. ‘Over three months I grew an enormous piece of knitting,’ she remembers, ‘and that idea of something growing really appealed to me. I felt like a bit of a spider.’

She was spotted by artist Freddie Robins, who encouraged her to study textiles at the Royal College of Art, where she became increasingly interested in the relationship between clothing and the body. People would give her clothes and she began collecting, researching and thinking about the hand-made.

However, the catalyst for her current work occurred when she was donated a sweater that had belonged to her great-uncle, a painter whose habit of leaning forward as he worked had completely worn its forearms away. ‘I was touched to see in that damage how his body moved,’ she remembers. ‘I could clearly see him. Even more exciting was seeing my aunt’s repair. It was slightly slapdash but it did the job.’

After graduating she kept, in her words, ‘investigating holes and the different ways in which they brought me into contact with people,’ as well as experimenting with colour. Intriguingly, she also decided to become a nurse. ‘I’d always fantasised that I’d make a great nurse. I wanted to get an insight into a more challenging kind of care.’ Her idea was to nurse during the day and keep the studio going in her spare time, but the two proved incompatible.

Nursing’s loss is the art world’s gain, and for the prize Pym will be showing two new sweaters: one from a GP and another belonging to an intensive-care nurse, along with text describing their stories and profile pictures. She will also be working in the V&A doing repairs for visitors and creating a new piece from a tracksuit. If you’re bringing an item along to be mended be prepared for a chat. ‘I really love other people’s problems,’ she says. ‘Often that’s the basis for me to begin my work.’

celiapym.com
The inspiration for Romilly Saumarez Smith's meticulously made, beautifully detailed jewellery and boxes came from an unlikely place—gifts for the children's Christmas stockings. "I didn't want the things to cost too much," she explains. "I thought I'd just see whether I could get some Roman rings or something. I looked on eBay and, of course, there's a mass of stuff. They were things of such resonance and beauty. Almost immediately I started thinking I could do something with them. They never got into the stockings..."

Instead, these ancient artefacts, including belt buckles, nails, bridle charms, thimbles and clasps, became the starting point for a new collection of jewellery called Newfoundland.

For 25 years Saumarez Smith had been one of the nation's leading bookbinders. However, as time went on she began to shift her attention into a slightly different area. "I started using metal on the books—bashing copper wire," she says. "I found the action of bending metal and making shapes very appealing. It felt that I had found the material which, maybe, I should have always been working in." In 2004 the Yale Center for British Art in Connecticut hosted a solo exhibition of her bookbindings with some jewellery. However, ill health intervened, confining Saumarez Smith to a wheelchair and unable to use her hands.

Initially she stopped making, but in 2009 she was introduced to jewellery designer Lucie Gledhill (via the textile artist Mary Restieaux) and together the pair created a system of producing new work. "We had to find a way of making things, talking about things," she says. "It's extremely difficult to describe something without using your hands. I don't feel I'm always tremendously articulate. There's all this stuff that goes on in your head that you want to describe with your hands so badly. And you just can't do that." Gledhill still works with her one day a week and Saumarez Smith also brings in Anna Wales and Laura Ngyou. "It has ended up working in exactly the same way that I always worked— that the last piece informs the next," she says.

For the prize the artist will be showing a combination of new and old boxes, which include finds such as Tudor glass, an old button and an Anglo-Saxon ring. "Everywhere we walk in this country there are treasures beneath our feet. I am touched that a particular find comes to me and that I can give it a new life, while referencing the place from which it emerged," she concludes. Gic

romillysaumarezsmith.com
There’s nothing brash or flashy about Andrea Walsh’s jewel-like boxes, but instead they exude a quiet authority. ‘I would say my work is sculptural,’ she says. ‘It’s very minimal. I’m interested in paring down to an essence of something – whether that’s form or an idea.’ Working primarily in a combination of glass and ceramic, her vessels have evolved gently over the years creating an incredibly coherent body of work. ‘I’ve always been interested in the idea of the vessel,’ she says. ‘The idea of something enclosed, protected. The container behaving like a shell.’

She initially studied fine art at Staffordshire University, and while the course was largely conceptual, students had access to some wonderful facilities. She began to experiment with different materials, including glass, but was frustrated at needing the constant help of technicians, so she spent a year at Dudley’s International Glass Centre learning an array of techniques. This was followed by a Masters in the material at Edinburgh College of Art, where she introduced clay to her practice and learnt to slip cast.

In 2009 she won an Artist into Industry residency through the British Ceramics Biennial in Stoke-on-Trent, which took her to the Barlaston factory of Wedgwood’s Minton brand. This in part inspired her to move from producing vessels to differently sized faceted boxes in glass and fine bone china. Importantly, too, she started to add some (subtle) gold decoration to her pieces.

Another key moment came in 2014 during an artist residency funded by Creative Scotland at Edinburgh College of Art, which provided her with a bursary to travel to Japan. Visiting the art museums on Naoshima she had a moment of clarity: ‘The experience of the artwork and how it was displayed, the consideration and the thought... was incredible.’ She began making the first of her ‘Contained Boxes’ as soon as she arrived back in the UK, showing them initially at the Crafts Council’s fair Collect in 2015. ‘I felt like my work had become more refined, more focused,’ she says. Walsh isn’t making any huge leaps in her pieces for the prize; instead she will be presenting a continuation of the series of softer, more organic, forms. After all, incremental change and beautiful refinement are more her thing.
Glass artist and sculptor Emma Woffenden is attempting to describe her work and, it transpires, this is no easy task. Stumbling for a moment, she says her pieces ‘look quite alien but quite classical at the same time. I always like to say that my work is humorous, but I don’t think that’s necessarily true. What I find funny isn’t what other people seem to find amusing. I think I mean funny in a kind of absurd way. It can be quite elegant, too, in a formal way. It’s often quite austere, a bit cold but then very sensual as well.’ She pauses, trying to find a way to conclude neatly: ‘There are loads of ambiguities,’ she says.

Working with a wide variety of techniques and materials, including gypsum fibreglass and plastic, she creates macabre new worlds, inhabited by weirdly distorted figures that are based around the human body, although sometimes in the most abstract way. She specialised in glass on the 3D Design, Ceramics and Glass course at West Surrey College of Art and Design, and in her final year went on a pivotal exchange programme to Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia. ‘I thought I could learn something new. Once I started I didn’t stop… The thing I like about glass is that it looks contemporary and it also looks quite futuristic. It has this amazing materiality,’ she explains. Subsequently, she studied at the Royal College of Art, where she learned about techniques such as model making.

While Woffenden is primarily known for the one-off work that straddles the craft and fine art worlds (she has exhibited in places such as Edinburgh’s Dovecot Studio and the Royal Academy of Arts), she has also been the driving force behind transglass with partner, Tord Boontje, since 1997. The series of products uses recycled glass to create new objects, so a diagonally cut Soave bottle is turned into a jug or two Chardonnay bottles become a carafe. Initially the pieces were produced in the pair’s London studio, but since 2005 they have been made in a workshop in Guatemala City, where young people learn glass-making skills with some becoming experts in cutting and polishing. ‘It’s quite extraordinary transglass has had such a long life,’ she says. ‘I feel proud that people are still talking about it.’

For the prize she will be showing three figures in mixed media, containing mould-blown and free-blown elements and that, in the artist’s words, ‘move from transparency into the opaque’. GG

emmawoffenden.com

Growing up, Laura Youngson Coll was always making. Her father has kept one of her childhood creations, a miniature living room made out of paper, only a few centimetres in length and complete with a tiny sofa and a set of plants. ‘I guess I was into the small and the intricate and the three-dimensional from a young age,’ she smiles. Nowadays, she uses leather and, increasingly, the finer, flimer medium of vellum for her work. Trained in fine art and sculpture, initially at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art in Dundee and then the Royal College of Art, she came across the material by accident, after accepting a part-time position at a fine bookbinders. This chance role would transform her practice, and she now creates all her work from the leftover scraps and offcuts she collects from the workshop. ‘It wasn’t really my intention to use leather necessarily,’ she confesses, ‘but I’d built up this extraordinary knowledge over the years, and there’s just so many things I can do with it.’

The daughter of an archaeologist and an environmental educator, Youngson Coll has always been fascinated by the natural world, particularly the parts of it that we tend to overlook. For the past few years, this has meant ruminating on the cells and systems found beneath the scientist’s lens. For the prize she will present three sculptures that have sprung from this ongoing exploration, with two inspired by the 19th-century biologist and philosopher Ernst Haeckel. ‘He not only altered our imaginations of ourselves and the world round us, but he radically changed our understanding of living systems too,’ she observes. For her third sculpture, she will bring the spirit of Haeckel into the 21st century with a new piece, Alpidium. Its starting point is the sea squirt, an underwater organism that contains a cancer-inhibiting compound. It’s a revolutionary pharmaceutical discovery, but also one with personal ramifications, and the sculpture exists, she explains, on a kind of continuum with her presentation for this year’s Jerwood Makers Open. For that commission, she made work responding to the loss of her partner, Richard Sharpe, who died from lymphoma in 2015. A delicate cluster of gossamer-like vellum pods, Alpidium also makes the most of a handful of techniques she developed during the making of the Jerwood commission, including casting the material using moulds. ‘I’ve pared the vellum down so it’s almost translucent,’ she adds. ‘I love vellum for its visual qualities, and the extraordinary way it catches light. I think that adds life to my pieces, because they change dramatically depending on the light. There’s a liveliness that comes from the material.’

Imogen Greenhalgh
laurayoungsoncoll.co.uk

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