FAIRE

CRAFTING A CREATIVE LIFE

ISSUE 8

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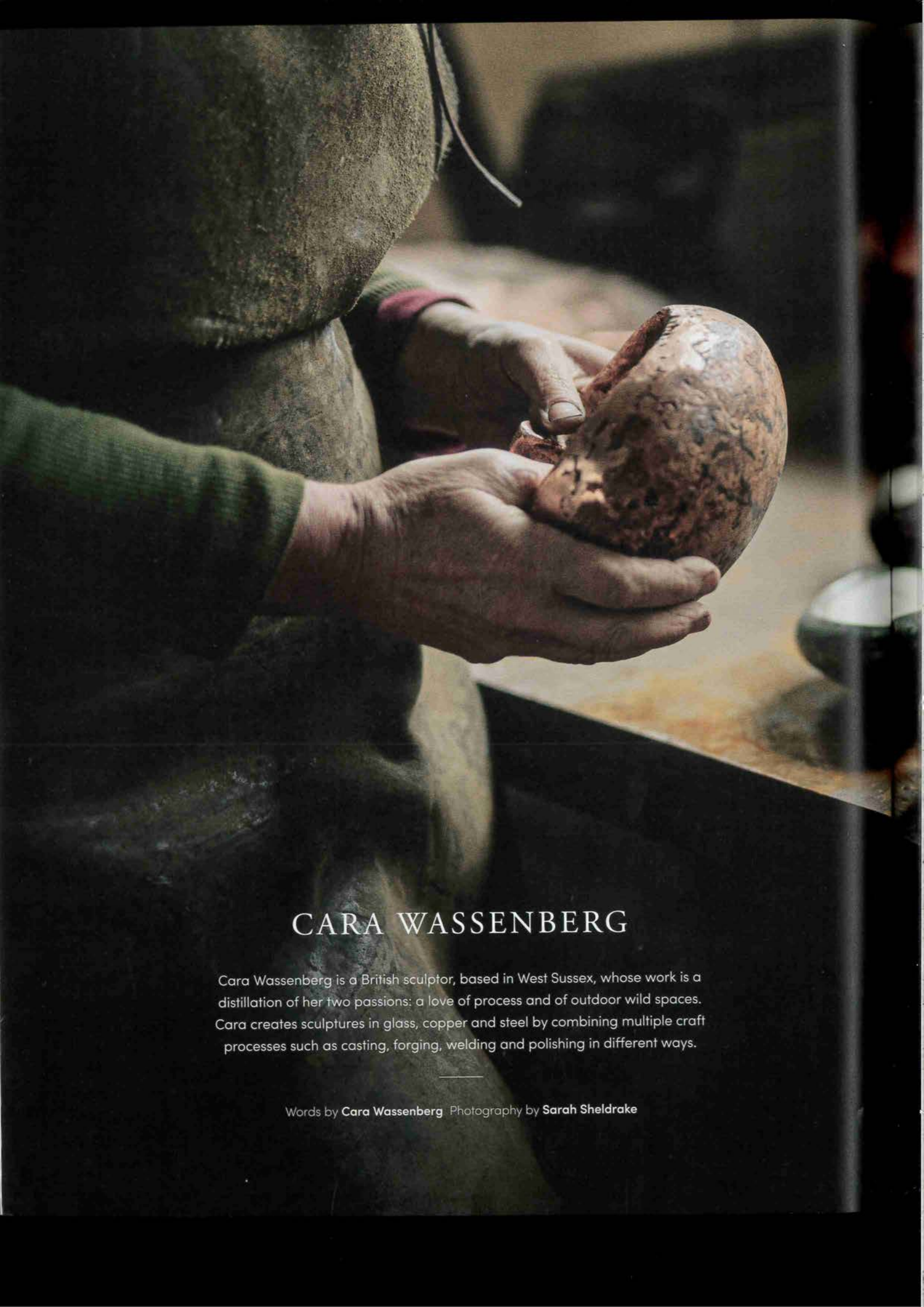
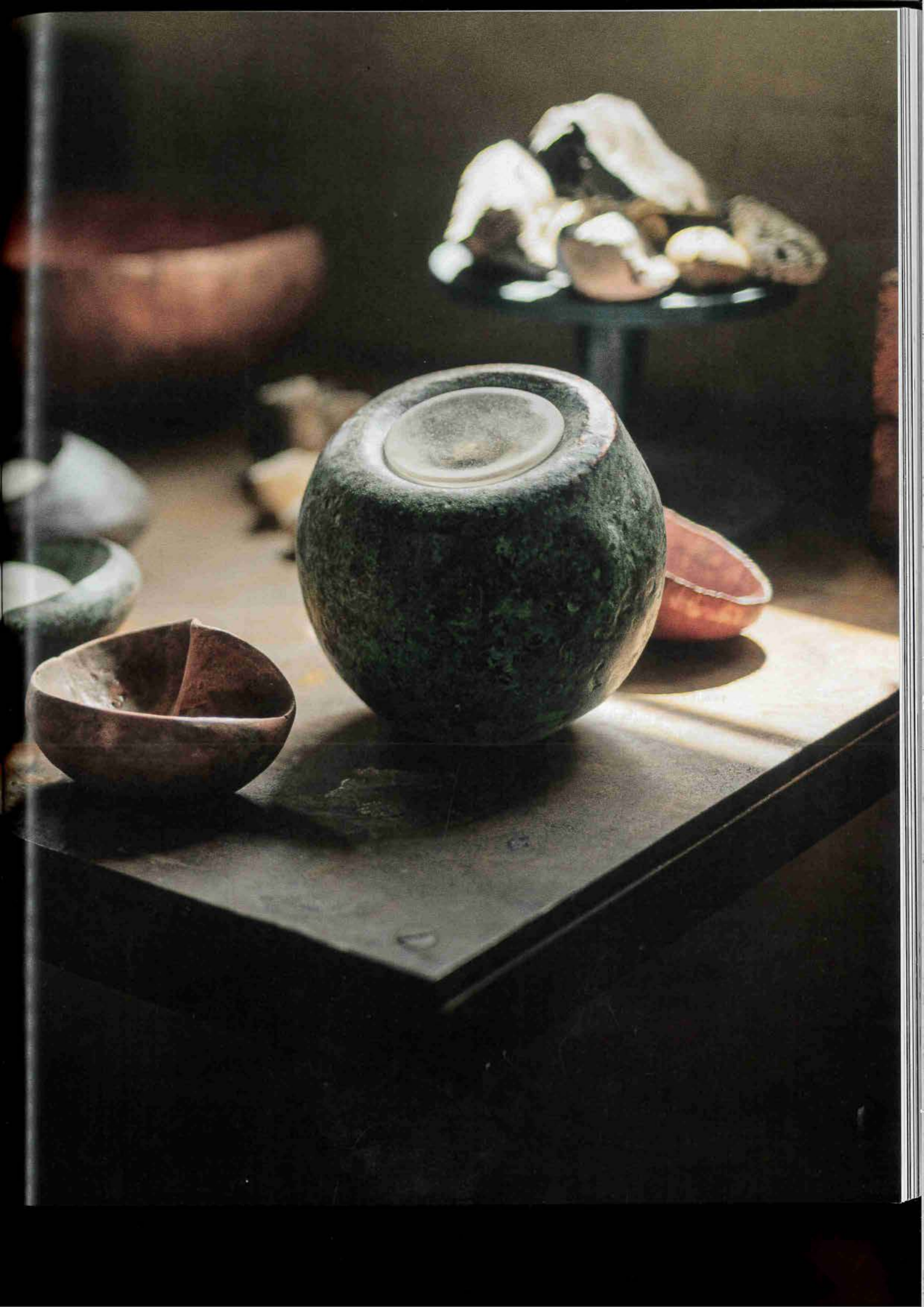
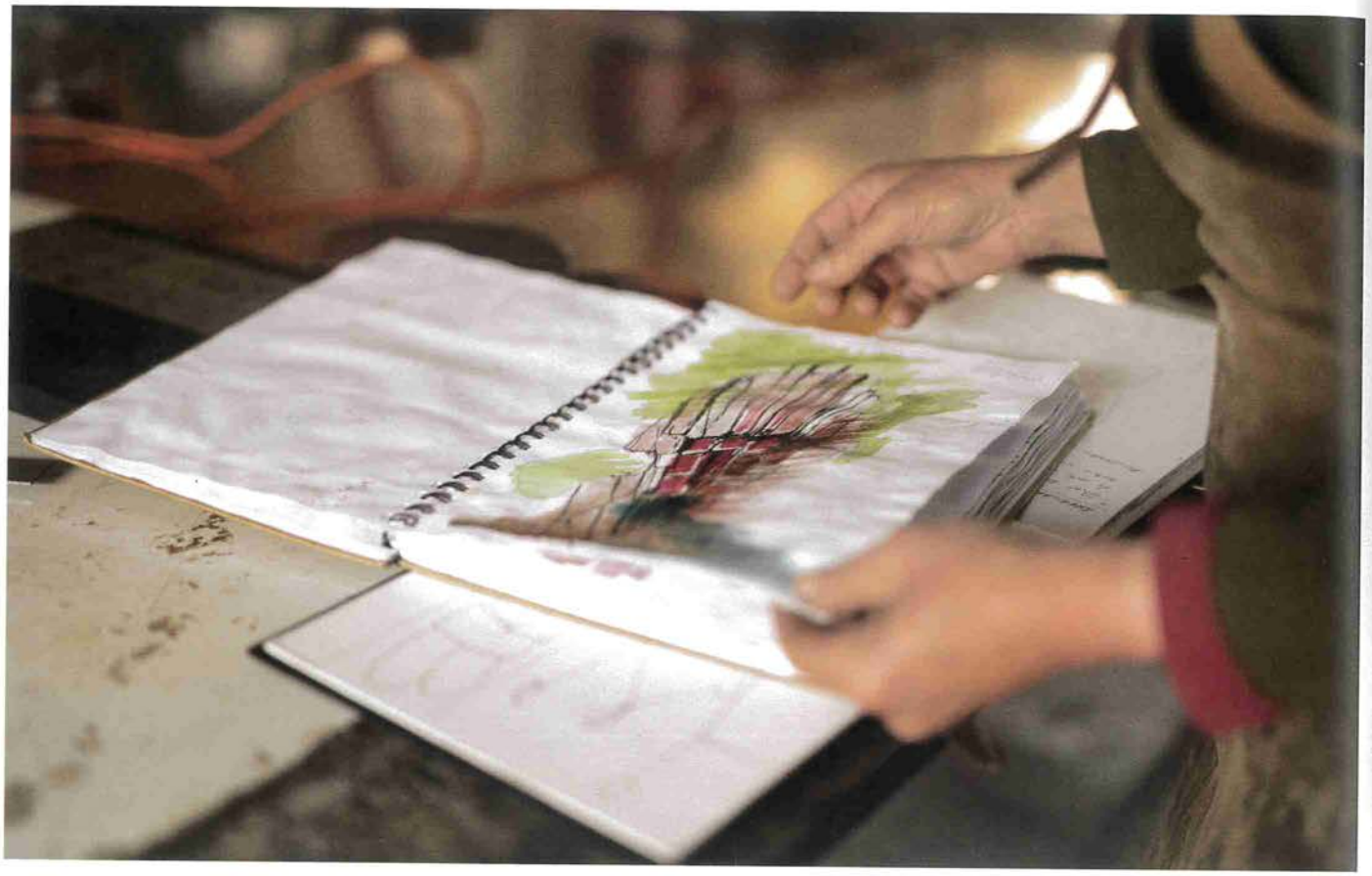


CARA WASSENBERG

Cara Wassenberg is a British sculptor, based in West Sussex, whose work is a distillation of her two passions: a love of process and of outdoor wild spaces. Cara creates sculptures in glass, copper and steel by combining multiple craft processes such as casting, forging, welding and polishing in different ways.

Words by **Cara Wassenberg** Photography by **Sarah Sheldrake**





EARLY YEARS

I grew up on a farm in Dorset, where nearly every event of the day stemmed from a practical need. The cattle had to be milked and fed, the turkeys plucked before Christmas Eve and the fences mended when the cows got out. There wasn't time to mull over creative ideas and it was always a slight frustration to me that my father, a tenant farmer (who left school early to help his father on the farm after the war), couldn't see the world through my eyes. However, what he did possess was a strong link to the land, an instinctual knowledge and a feel for the earth. He was a keen vegetable grower almost up until the year he died. He always knew the right time and where to plant which seed.

My mother embraced the traditional role of the farmer's wife, but through her, I saw glimpses of another way of seeing, a sort of beautifully enhanced practicality. Her church flower arrangements were always just a cut above the rest and our home-sewn clothes were made with acute attention to detail. Our Christmas decorations were never tipped out of the box and flung up, but fastidiously curated each year. Apart from the vague knowledge that my aunt had studied fashion design at a local college, there really wasn't much history or knowledge of formal art education in my family.

Although my parents parted ways when I was only eight, the early years of my life spent on our farm were earthy and visceral. With my pet goat Hansel as a permanent companion, I was free to roam and build dens and dams. I found secret spaces, sources of river clay for thumb pots and grasses that could be woven into plates for imaginary picnics.

With hindsight, it is easy to see how the elements of my early childhood fed so directly into my creative practice today, but of course, those pathways at the time of walking are never quite so clear to see. There were many twists and turns along the way. Until I started to connect with creative people and observe how they managed their studio time and space, it was hard for me to see how it was possible to live a creative life in practical and economic terms.

FINDING MY METAL

Having finally shaken off the confines and social complexities of the English boarding school system, I spent a rich and extremely experimental 'foundation' year in a small square red brick building at my local college, dipping my toe into the worlds of ceramics, textiles, painting, graphic design and photography. I discovered the great joy that was to be found in working out how to make something three-dimensional. However, when I walked out of Coventry Polytechnic three years later with a BA in Fine Art, I can honestly say I was no nearer to knowing how to pursue any sort of creative career than when I entered further education.

I moved with a friend to Bristol, and I distinctly remember taking a card out of the job centre window for a position with an interior designer who was working out of a Portakabin on her father's farm in the Mendips. My mother had taught me how to sew and I remembered learning how to follow a paper pattern and instructions in lessons at school. I enjoyed the predictability, rhythm and process involved in making large chintz curtains with their sumptuous goblet and pinch pleats for her wealthy clients from Mendip manor houses.

One day my boss, Victoria, got wind of the fact that I had found a place in a ramshackle group studio in Bristol's old dockyards and asked if I could make a metal chandelier complete with candle sconces for one of her manor house clients. I tried but struggled. I had no knowledge of forming metal or creating heat to help it bend. I ended up knocking on the forge door of Monty Ball, the local farrier. What followed was a slightly unconventional apprenticeship. Monty, who finally did emerge that day from the dark depths of his Welsh coal-encrusted forge, had a broad Mendip accent and a pipe that seemed almost permanently attached to his lower lip. He showed me how to make the chandelier and carefully forge pipe to hold the candles.

I learned a lot about the basics of metal construction and slowly worked out the uses for many of the medieval-looking tools that lined the walls of his workshop. I also shared

'Sometimes I think the atmosphere during the firing in my workshop is one of an alchemist. Each part of the making process has its own distinct set of smells. While the kiln is on, a wonderful warmth pervades my normally draughty ex-cowshed. Then the plaster can be gently removed and the glass released.'

my workbench with his brother Pete, who showed me how to tie the tops of onions, ready for display at local shows. But after about a year we both knew it was time for me to move on and find some more creative tuition. Hereford College of Technology offered a one-year course in blacksmithing and metalwork design, so I packed my bags and headed north.

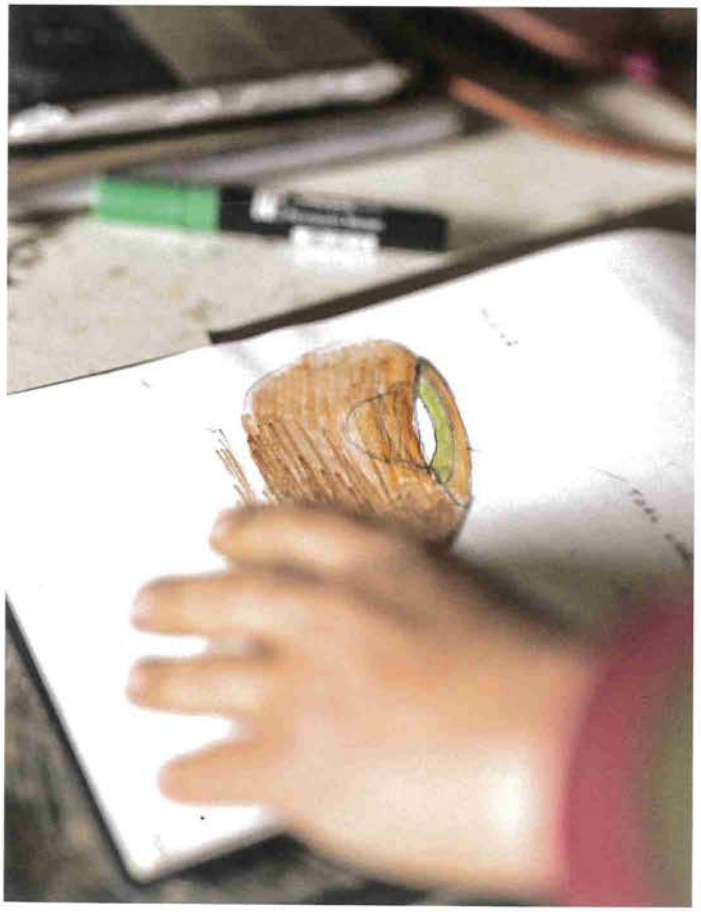
WORKING WITH ACHIM KUHN

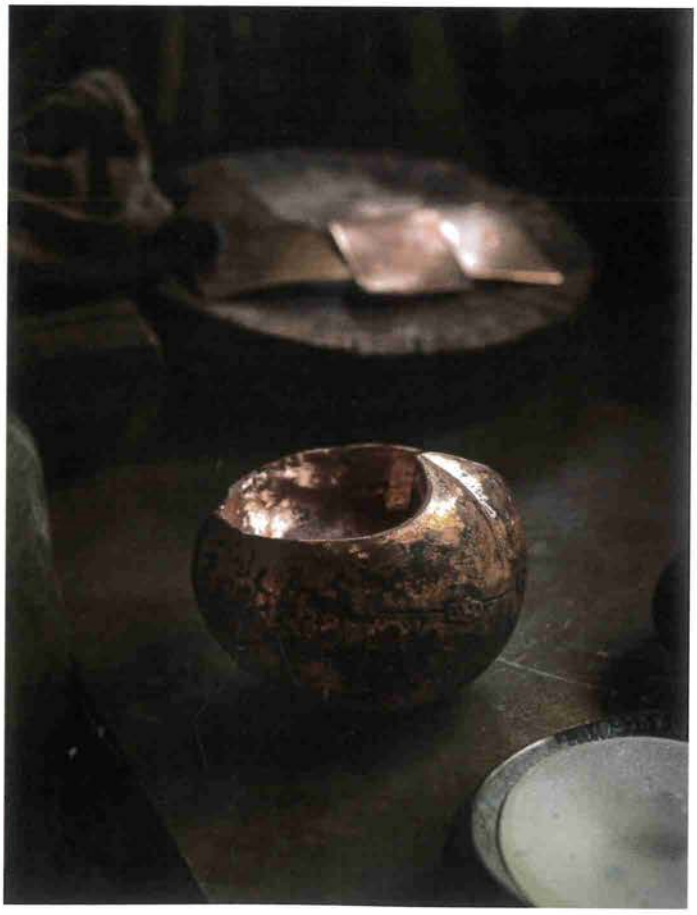
Four years later I had built up a modest repertoire of blacksmithing skills and ways to form mild steel. Above all, I'd learned that the blacksmithing community is a generous one when it comes to sharing hospitality and knowledge. I had found opportunities to work and exhibit in England, America and Portugal, but it was only after moving to Germany in 1996 and an offer of part-time work from Achim Kuhn (a revered blacksmith from the former East Berlin) that I eventually discovered the sheer joy of working with copper.

In an adjoining studio to the main forge at Achim Kuhn Gmbh, a four-meter-high plaster statue of three naked muscle-bound giants towered above work benches, gas bottles and copper sheets. As part of the restoration programme after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the company had won the contract to recreate the monument for the roof of the telecommunications museum near the Brandenburg Gate. Each part was painstakingly formed from copper sheets, often in multiple sections, then gas-welded together. The whole structure is supported with an internal steel frame in much the same way as the Statue of Liberty.

Axel and Hendrick, two of Achim Kuhn's employees, were patient teachers. They showed me how to judge the amount of copper needed for each section. They demonstrated how to anneal the sheet sections with propane gas, quenching it in water till it became soft and malleable, and how to form it over the steel-domed stakes into concave curves of wooden blocks and across long, tapered mandrels. Finally, I was shown how to join the parts together using the oxy-acetylene torch, a skill that took many hours to get the hang of and one that I continue to improve to this day.

My first forays into the world of copper forming were inspired by watching my children roll snowballs, which inevitably picked up sticks and leaves during their final rolls. I made a huge globe covered in forged copper leaves. I am still asked to make these globes to commission today. I am now lucky enough to be able to pass on some of my blacksmithing and copper-working skills in the forge at West Dean College of Art and Design in West Sussex near my home, where I teach several short courses.





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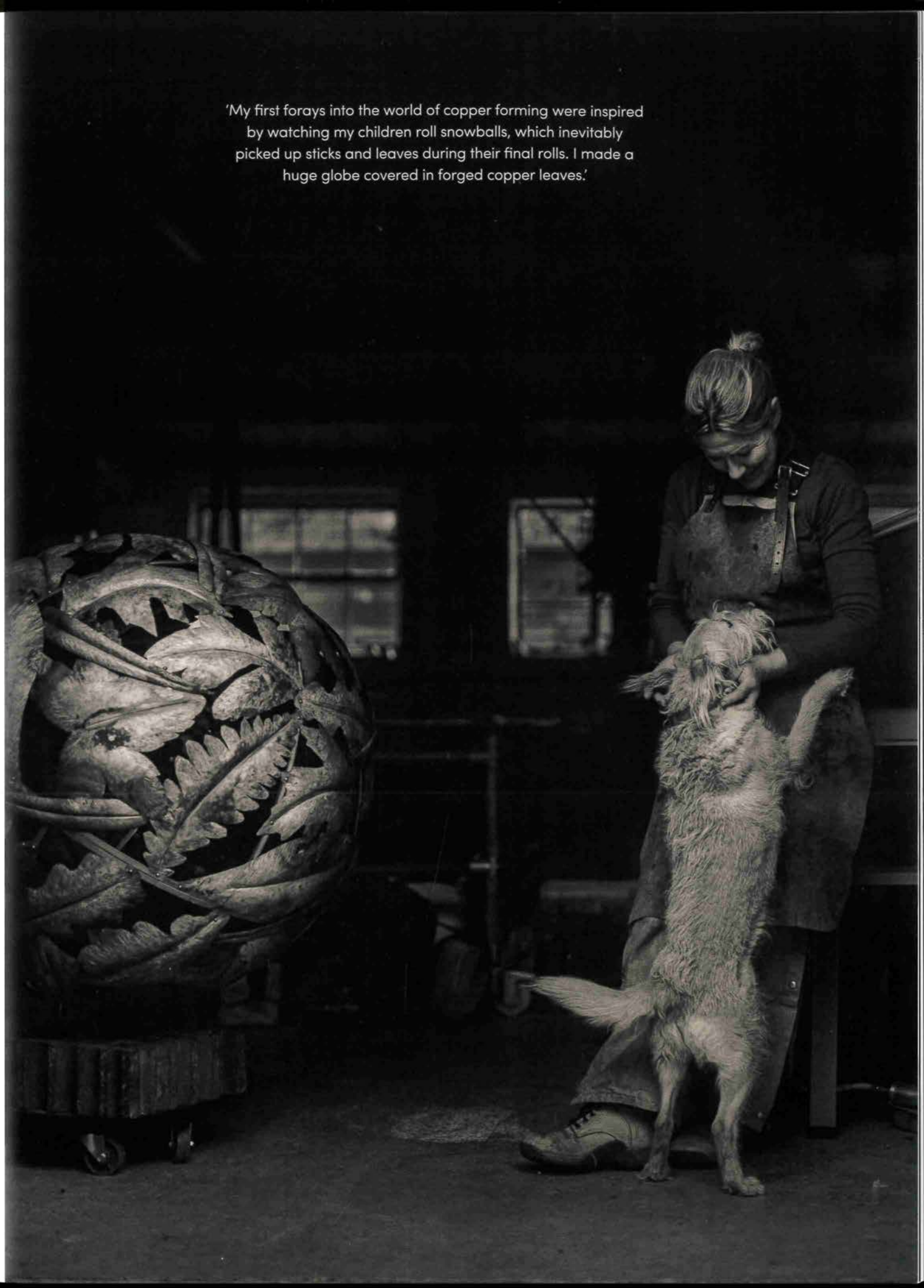
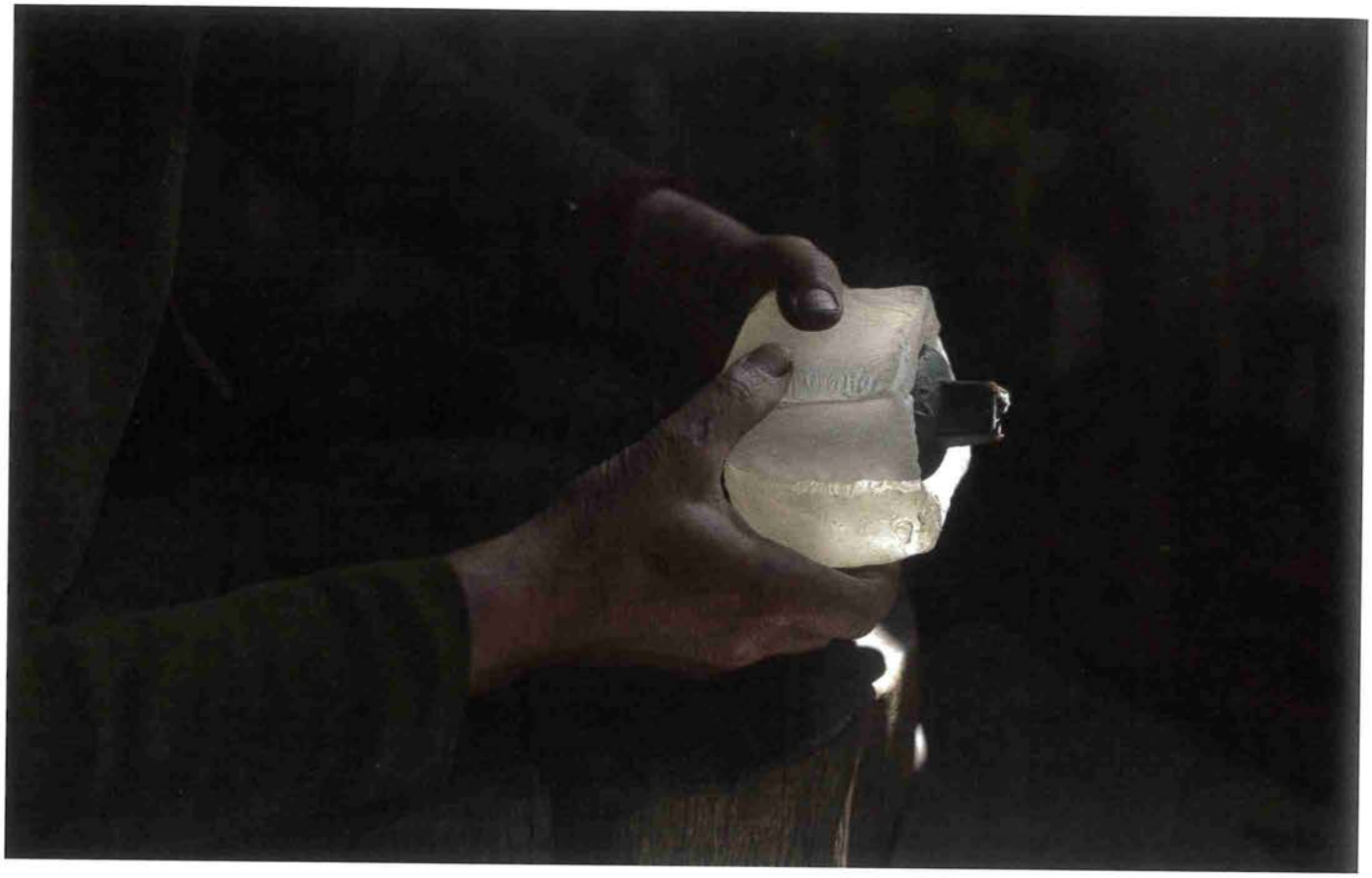




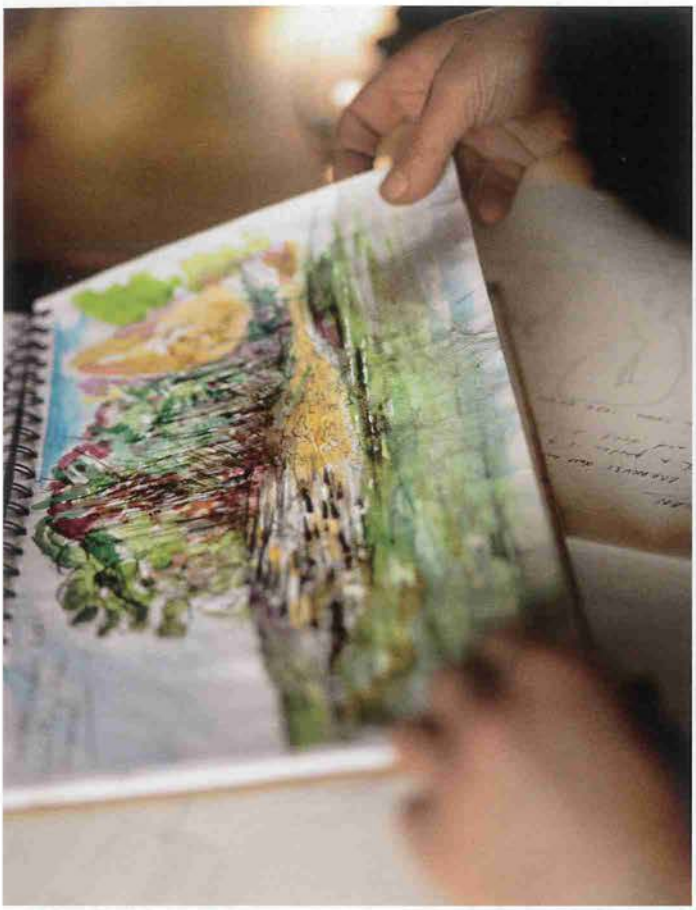
A SENSE OF PLACE

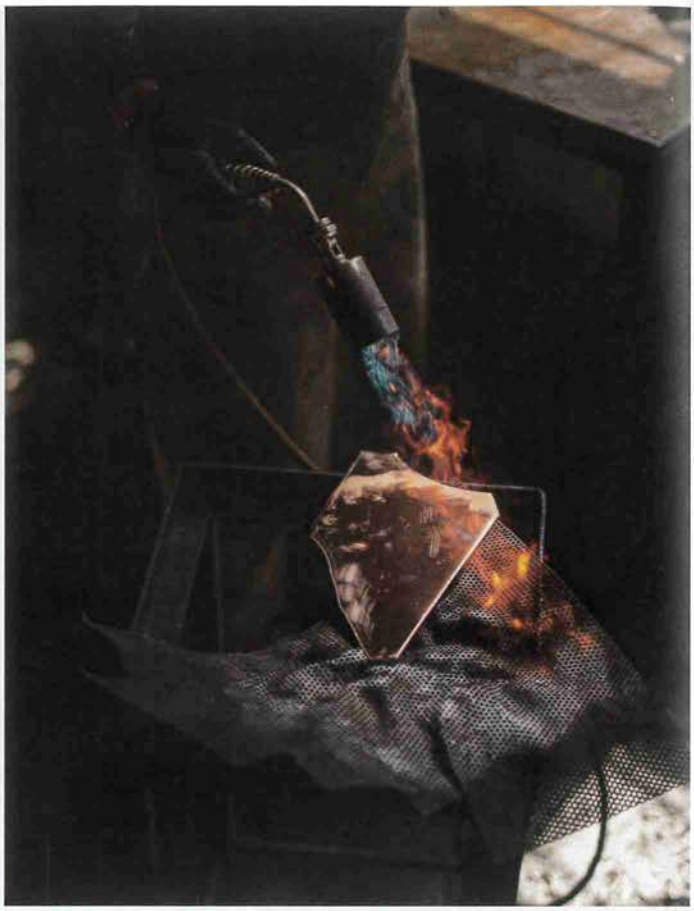
Despite much traveling in the US, Portugal and Germany, I am always drawn back to the United Kingdom, which is where I settled with my family in 1999. I love Scotland, the Pembrokeshire coastline of Wales, Dorset (where I grew up) and the smaller pockets of Hampshire and West Sussex, where I brought up my children.

In 2017 I completed an MA in Metal and Glass at the University of the Creative Arts in Farnham. My overriding aim in enrolling in the course was to bring light and translucency into my copper and steel sculpture. While I loved the mineral properties of my materials, both seemed to oxidize too quickly and almost seemed to need a third party to show them off. I started to explore cast glass working techniques and how glass could be incorporated into my sculptural pieces.

The first series I completed after finishing my degree was called *Archipelago*, made of cast glass and forged steel. It was conceived after a family sailing trip, inspired by the rugged metamorphic rocks and clear surrounding waters of that string of Swedish islands where I discovered a purity that felt both timeless and vulnerable.

That summer I rediscovered a love of coastal and wild swimming and of being around riverbanks, rocks and all things watery. Several more trips and dips into the waters around Pembroke, Dartmoor and Scotland inspired and initiated the making of my *Places to Swim* cast glass and copper series. There is something intoxicating about the combination of these two materials. Perhaps this is partly due to the visual similarities of glass and water, but also to how the copper appears when seen through the glass. A strong visceral sense that seems linked to an internal muscle memory type of feeling feeds directly into the design of the piece – how it feels to peer at the base of a rock through my swim goggles and how it would feel to slide my feet over a rocky surface or rough grassy bank and launch into the sharp freshness of cold water. This swimming memory ensures that I maintain a strong emotional connection with a sculpture until it is completed.





PROCESS

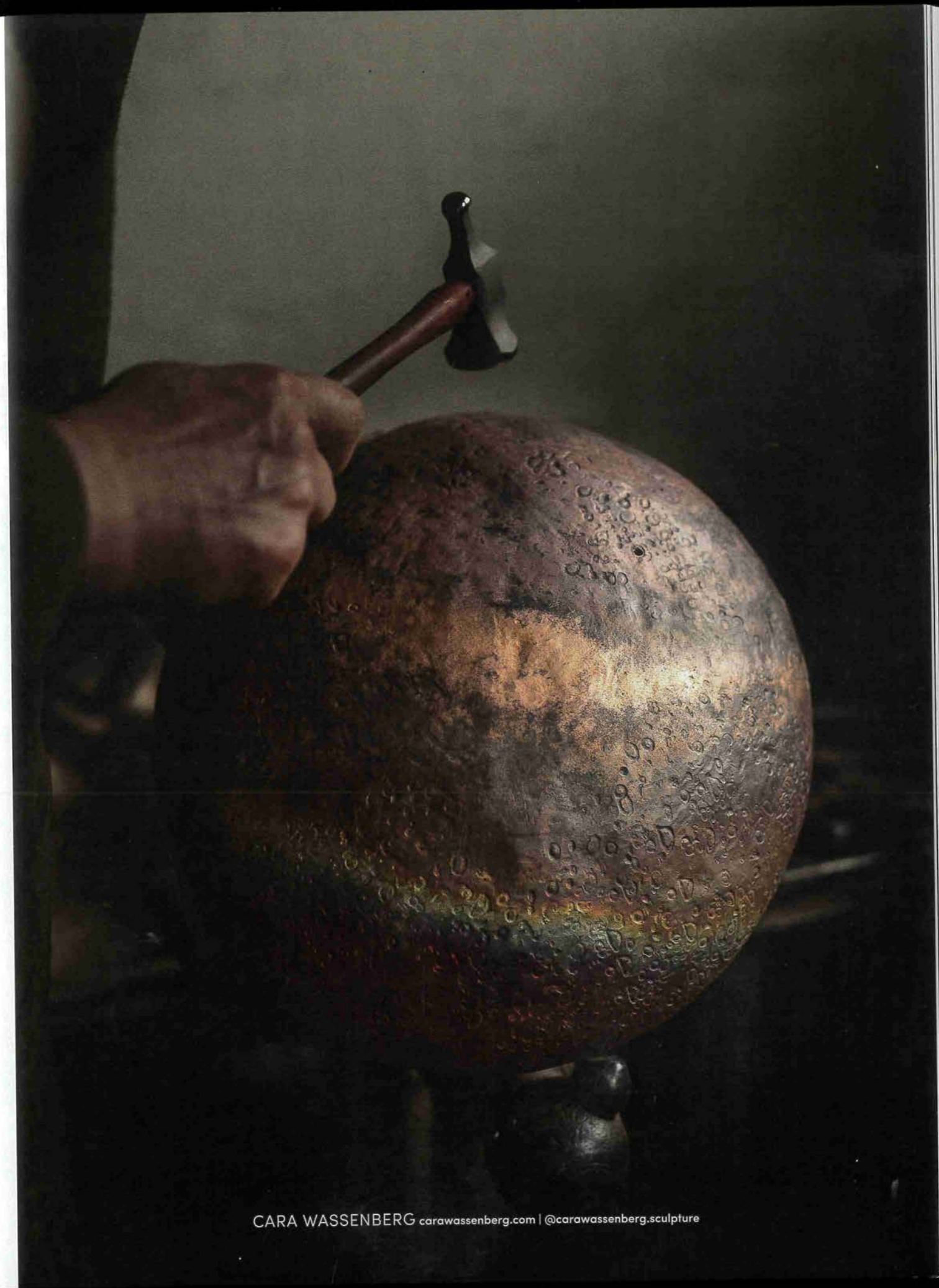
I have a slight obsession with process, which is lucky because the lost wax process I use to form the cast glass is multi-layered and lengthy. The copper part always comes first and is inspired by the landscapes I have sketched and photographed. Using forged and welded steel tools, I have built up a textural repertoire that is imprinted on the copper prior to forging. I achieve complex curves and convex shapes using stakes, hammers and mandrels, and a combination of techniques. I also gas-weld these forged copper sections together to create more complex shapes using a thin piece of copper sliced from a larger sheet.

Once the copper part is complete, the cast glass element nearly always begins its life as a clay model that may even contain earth and stones from the location where I started to research the piece. This gives me some idea of the piece's final composition. The clay is then converted to a wax form, which is added to with castings taken off stone or bark or even, in the case of my latest trip to Wales, barnacle-covered rocks to build up textures within the glass. Once I am happy with the form, I make a plaster mould of the wax form and the wax is then steamed out and the clay removed. Finally, the mould is ready to be filled with glass and fired.

Each cast is normally in the kiln for at least five days because it must cool very slowly so the glass doesn't crack. I never quite know what will emerge and the anticipation is thrilling.

ONGOING LOVE AFFAIR

An ongoing love affair with swimming and wild water exploration means that in my workshop I remain focused on creating new sculptural copper and glass pieces with their polished glass pools that bring the audience into my underwater world. I hope that conversations about these pieces may in some way focus attention on both the beauty and the fragility of our oceans and the importance of maintaining their beautiful biodiversity. ♦



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