



# THE GENE HOME PROJECT

*Jacob van der Beugel's new commission at Chatsworth House embeds the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire's DNA into the fabric of the building. Teleri Lloyd-Jones explores the appliance of science. Installation photography by Trent McMinn*

There's something extraordinary happening at Chatsworth. In the 20-metre long North Sketch Gallery, columns of DNA are appearing, protruding from the wall. It's a family portrait, but like none you've seen before.

It is the work of ceramist Jacob van der Beugel. A room clad entirely in ceramic panels which detail, among other things, the DNA sequences of the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire and their family. On the day we meet, he's at the end of the first installation period, having completed the main sections with the trickier borders to be tackled in the New Year. As we chat he's engaged, and talks with the spark of someone who's still very much on the inside of a consuming project. He's also very, very tired. In March, when the permanent installation is completed, van der Beugel will be at the end of a four-year journey, the last two focused on making 659 panels to cover all four walls of the gallery.

It's his largest and most complex piece of work to date – but when the idea of a ceramic installation was first mooted at Chatsworth, the original plan was to commission a series of chimneypiece works. The Duke approached consultant and curator Joanna Bird to get her thoughts on who the Chatsworth House Trust should consider. Bird created a shortlist of six artists, van der Beugel being the youngest and least experienced

in large installations. After much discussion, the Duke and Duchess asked the ceramist to present his own vision; no longer a chimneypiece installation but whatever he felt compelled to create. 'He came back and was so inspiring, so convincing,' says the Duke, that they took a leap of faith, commissioning an entire ceramic room.

The permanent installation is made from repeating, regimented – yet hand-made – ceramic panels. On one wall, the tiles are punctuated with columns of small inserts, while the opposite wall is covered in mirrors, each one given a ceramic frame. The border sections will soon be hidden, but as we are here mid-installation we can glimpse the underneath, the darkness that creates those crucial shadow gaps.

The inserts represent the revised Cambridge Reference Sequence for human mitochondrial DNA, with flush or sunken inserts marking where the personal DNA of the Duke, Duchess, their son Lord Burlington and his wife, differs from this sequence. If the placements of the blocks are precise, their form isn't. They have been cut, scored and then torn by hand to create an organic surface, a rock face in miniature. 'These little inserts embody what the piece is about,' explains van der Beugel. 'Which is the rationalising that science can do, rather than the reality of what it is to be a person. It loses so much in that process so it's



Left: Jacob van der Beugel, left, and the Duke of Devonshire in the North Sketch Gallery  
Opposite: *The North*

*Sketch Sequence*, work in progress, detail, Jacob van der Beugel, stoneware and molochite sand, 2014

about putting those two things together, to speak about humanity. If you imagine the rough texture to be someone's landscape, someone's history.'

The walls of Chatsworth are heavy with paintings of ancestors, the distillation of identity into image and symbol. Here we find a contemporary interpretation of that tradition. Within the mass of DNA datapoints there are other, personal references to be enjoyed. The beady-eyed may notice that some of the inserts are transparently glazed, and they pick up the light that floods through the large windows. These glazed points add another layer of meaning. There is the outline of the Duke's favourite walk around the house's gardens: 'The idea of walking through your own DNA landscape I thought was a lovely metaphor,' says the ceramist. A pattern of notation from the Duchess's favourite piece of music is also used (a John Rutter composition, for the curious).

Van der Beugel's installation is a conversation between structure and chance both in terms of its subject and the process of making it. The coding of DNA is juxtaposed with more human characteristics, such as this favourite piece of music – and then there's the panels, so precise and defined and yet each one perforated with moments of dynamism, unmediated tears and rips. The moment of letting go is essential within all the planning and measuring that van der

Beugel was tasked with: 'That's really important. Otherwise things become so restricted. It's nice to have something you can have no control over.'

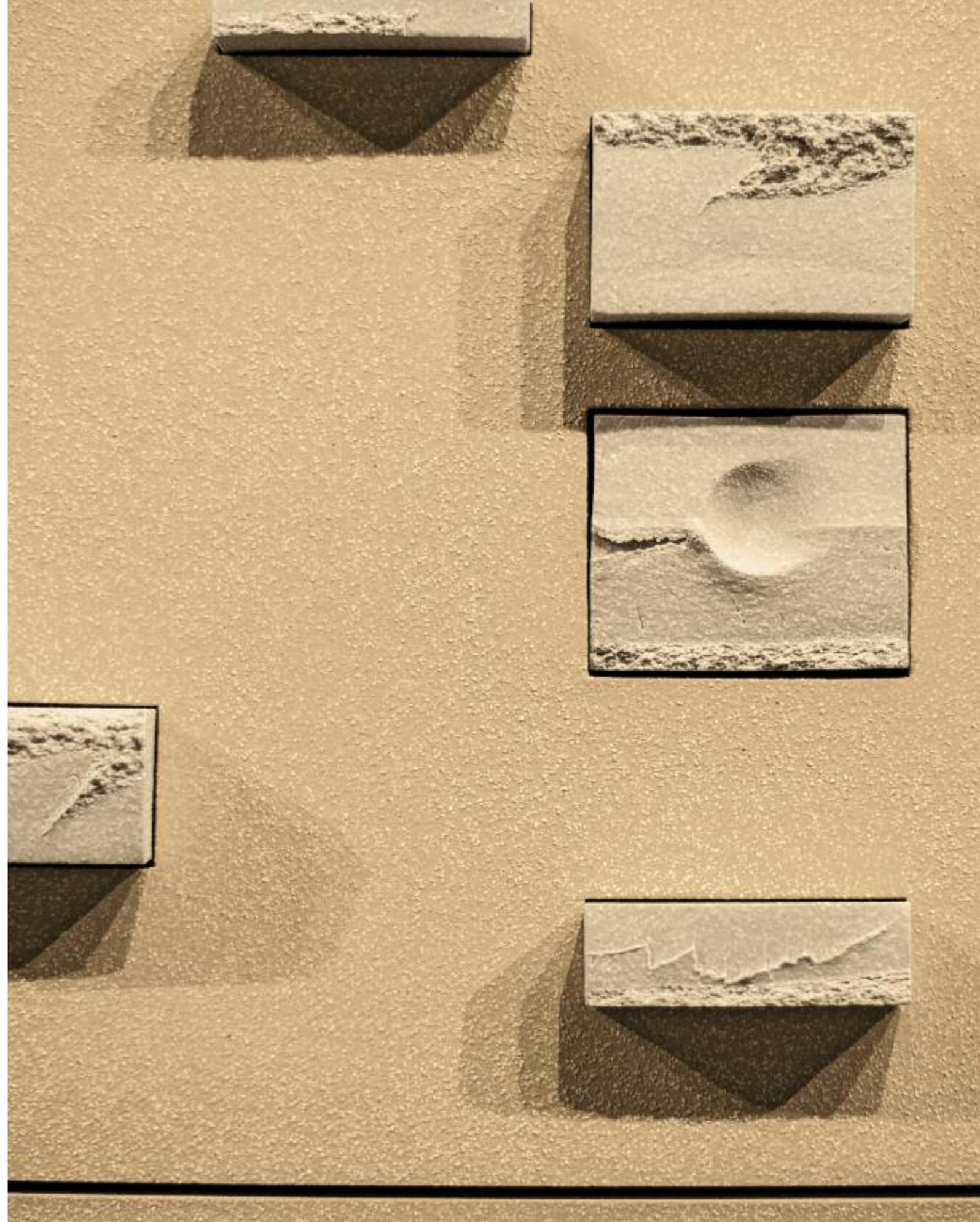
While the structure of the installation is central to van der Beugel's vision – the rows of datapoints, the pattern of tiling, the punctuation of windows – the humanity of the hand-made is also central. At its most fundamental, the surface of each tile is sponged to reveal the molochite sand within the clay, giving that grained look, an almost geological texture (resonating with the walls of sandstone seen from the windows). 'On some of the panels you can see where the cloth has bitten into more than another place,' he says, searching for a particular spot on the wall that he knows so well. 'It's the idea of looking, in order to see it's hand-made. It's the difference between something that is machined and something that's trying to be as perfect as the hand can make it, and the difference between the two is quite a powerful sentiment.'

Although this is van der Beugel's most ambitious work so far, those already acquainted with his work will recognise his hand. Over the last ten years, he's created arrangements of thrown vessels that trace such abstract subjects as the FTSE 100 index, his time as apprentice to Rupert Spira and assistant to Edmund de Waal plainly visible.

Over this same decade, the Duke has been developing his interest in contemporary craft.

**'It's the difference between something that is machined and something that's trying to be as perfect as the hand can make it'**

JACOB VAN DER BEUGEL





IMPOSTER PHOTO: GRAHAM MURRELL | NOCTURNE PHOTO: JOANNA BIRD



**Above:** *Nocturne* (detail), 2010  
**Above right:** *Imposter*, 2008  
**Opposite:** *The North*

*Sketch Sequence*, work in progress, detail, Jacob van der Beugel, stoneware and molochite sand, 2014

## ‘It was the family that was important at Chatsworth, but now it’s the house, the garden and the park’

THE DUKE OF DEVONSHIRE

‘The line between craft and contemporary art is getting more merged,’ he explains to me. ‘Furniture has limited editions and artists’ proofs. Everything is more blurred, so what that means now is you have *PAD* as well as *Frieze*. I think the most important thing of the year is *COLLECT*, where I see things and people and find out what’s happening – that’s really important for me.’

Since moving into Chatsworth following the death of his father in 2006, the current Duke and Duchess have been at the centre of a resurgence of contemporary work at the house, from Laura Ellen Bacon, Edmund de Waal and James Rigler to Sotheby’s annual sculpture show *Beyond Limits*, and more recently *Modern Makers*. So this commission fits into a trajectory of experimental work and in some ways, the Duke explains, this is a conscious decision. ‘One thing I’ve realised is that up until the 20th century, each incumbent here had new furniture made, nearly always new silver and, of course, painting. They never bought old furniture. Every 30 or 40 years, every generation, they’d get the best makers in France or Germany or England. Nothing happened in that direction in the 20th century.’ Chatsworth deserves today’s equivalent of Meissen or William Kent furniture: of its time, contemporary in style, substance and subject.

So what are the Duke’s thoughts about his own family’s DNA being integrated into the fabric of

Chatsworth? For him, it isn’t about connecting the family to the house, but instead another opportunity to connect visitors to it. ‘It used to be the family that was important at Chatsworth, but now it’s the house, the garden and the park. Because it used to be for the people who owned it, and was lived in for two or three months a year, but now it’s a place for a lot of people to come for quiet enjoyment. For intellectual stimulation. That’s Chatsworth’s contribution now. It’s a place that people can get all sorts of different pleasures from, at different levels.’ Reflecting this, the central section of van der Beugel’s installation includes small pieces of mirror in some of the spaces, allowing the visitor to become part of the contemporary portrait.

Having watched the project from start to finish, the Duke is looking forward to the result, and there is no denying his support for it: ‘Our luck is that Jacob should’ve chosen us to have done this here. It was a gamble for him, and he’s given us three years of his life. He’s done something that is extraordinary, right from the genesis in his mind. He has stuck to it, adapted it and expanded it.’

When you realise that he moved his studio from Cumbria to Devon in an effort to treble his workspace, it’s really impossible to overstate how much van der Beugel has invested in this work – thoughts, time, sweat, and at times, one suspects, sanity. He might have each inch of it inscribed

into his mind but on installation there were, of course, moments of discovery. In the morning, as the light lifts over the building – a private moment one assumes, as the house isn’t yet open to visitors – the sun’s rays are refracted in the bevels on the many mirrors onto the opposite wall. ‘You get rainbow lines that move over it. It’s extraordinary. It’s beautiful and it wasn’t planned,’ describes van der Beugel, satisfied that his own work has the power to surprise him.

He may still have the trickier parts of the room to complete but now he can see the end, does he feel changed by the experience? ‘Yes, definitely. Now I know I can do this, the possibilities are so much more diverse with where I can put work and what I can say.’ It’s true. Van der Beugel has not only fulfilled the requirements of architects, engineers, curators and client – to make by hand a cladding that will be in situ for decades, but also can be removed any time for conservation – he has somehow retained the focus on narrative and visual poetry. The Chatsworth commission will no doubt alter the course of his career. It is an astonishing achievement. The only question that remains is, who’s going to dust it?

*‘The North Sketch Sequence’ opens on 16 March at Chatsworth House, Bakewell, Derbyshire DE45 1PP. [www.jvdb-ceramics.com](http://www.jvdb-ceramics.com), [chatsworth.org](http://chatsworth.org), [www.joannabird.com](http://www.joannabird.com)*