

## New landscape at Boughton: Kim Wilkie's gateway to the underworld

Orpheus, a new landscape in an historic setting, is a stunning achievement, says Mary Keen

By Mary Keen

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No brainers and right brainers – the arty ones among us – have problems with the language of left brainers – those who are logical and understand maths.

I have a huge resistance towards any garden that claims to be based on the Fibonacci sequence. Or the Golden mean. Perhaps because I don't understand them. Keats's dictum that "if poetry come not as naturally as leaves to the trees, it had better not come at all" is probably the mission statement for those of us in the non-arithmetical camp. At its worst, this touchy feely approach can start the slide to nostalgia. At best, it guarantees the kick in the solar plexus that all great art delivers.



Orpheus, an inverted pyramid, reflects the restored mound.

Last week, I went to the opening of Kim Wilkie's new landform work, Orpheus, for the Duke of Buccleuch at [Boughton House](http://www.boughtonhouse.org.uk/) (<http://www.boughtonhouse.org.uk/>), near Kettering. With the press handout came a sheet on the Fibonacci sequence. It was raining hard. The story of Orpheus is sad. He was the musician who went down to the underworld to bring his wife Eurydice back from the dead, but lost her when he looked back. It was an unpropitious start. However, Boughton is an amazing place in any weather, with one of the few remaining formal landscapes in England.

[Wilkie](http://www.kimwilkie.com/) (<http://www.kimwilkie.com/>) is well known for understanding history, which he prefers to call "memory" and has a reputation for using the heritage of a place to make something of our own time. The most successful example of his genius for intervention in a historic landscape is at Heveningham, where he added nine curving grass terraces to replace a Victorian parterre. I suspect he is about to become even better known for his work at Boughton.

At the start of the commission, the present Duke took Wilkie to the top of the restored mound (imagine a pyramid with a flat top) to look back along the half-mile vista below. What should be done, he asked. "It would be interesting to go down rather than up," was the answer.

Two years later the dimensions of the pyramid mount were duplicated in an inverted chasm where the top became the bottom – a mirror of water to reflect the sky. But as the walker approaches, only the mound is visible.

Mildly downcast by talk of Fibonacci and non-stop rain, I walked towards the restored mount. The first thing you see is a spiralling stone rill with an upright steel cube at its centre. So far, so Fibonacci, I thought glumly.

But then, but then... You stop in your tracks and this extraordinary deep pit 50 metres square at the top opens out, with sloping terraces that lead down to a square, black pool at its base. There are times when you know you are in the presence of a great work and this was one of them. Is it partly the scale, partly the inversion of Olympus and Hades, the balance of heaven and hell, the contemplation of life and death? I cannot define what it is that trips the sensory triggers and made me stop chatting to friends, minding the rain, sneering at Fibonacci. It was bigger than everything, not just physically, but spiritually.

Talking to Wilkie about it later, I suggested that some people do find all the mathematical complexities associated with mystical proportions off-putting. That you cannot approach or create any work of art via a formula.

"Before anything else, it has to work on an emotional and sensual level. You should be able to walk into it without knowing anything about Eurydice or the Golden mean and be moved by it," was his answer. I asked him too about the Orpheus legend. He had a moving explanation for that. That the dead are with us always, if we only believe they are. That Orpheus questioned the presence of Eurydice by looking back and that the looking back myth is present in many legends and many lands. So when we gaze at the mirror-image of life in the Orpheus pool, we are also looking at death and the deaths of those we love. Explanations are as bad as mathematical theories and can never do justice to what is there. I hope by describing it from the perspective of a prejudiced onlooker, who was totally won over, that others will go to see it.

- **Boughton House** (<http://www.boughtonhouse.org.uk/>) opens August 1-Sept 1 daily, 2-5pm, last entry 4pm. Landscape Tours (park and garden only), Weds 12-1pm, £5.