

# Beauty of the beasts

'I really don't see myself as a macabre artist. My work is celebratory, rejoicing in the beauty of it all,' says artist Silvy Weatherall, who creates beautiful artwork from roadkill and the waste products of her husband's game dealing business, in what she calls a celebration of 'the beauty of nature in death'

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Surrounded in her studio by boxes of skulls, claws, teeth and feathers, it's no wonder Nithsdale artist Silvy Weatherall says some people find her work "a bit macabre".

But creating beautiful artwork from roadkill and the waste products of her husband's game dealing business is, she believes, a celebration of "the beauty of nature in death".

It also helps counter her "pathological fear of waste, of throwing things away".

"No animals are killed for my practice," she explains. "I am taking materials which would otherwise be disposed of and using them in a practical and worthy manner, as a sort of testimony to their lives."

"I really don't see myself as a macabre artist. I feel my work is celebratory, rejoicing in the beauty of it all."

Exhibiting her "deconstructed taxidermy" in a show called A Body Of Parts, at Jupiter Artland

near Edinburgh in 2014, Silvy says she was even thanked by a vegetarian for celebrating the beauty and life of the animals.

Her work at Jupiter was admired by Emily Walsh, managing director of the Fine Art Society in Edinburgh, who invited Silvy to exhibit in the Society's Dundas Street gallery this autumn. The resulting exhibition, Another Man's Treasure, which runs until November 12, brings together about 40 pieces including framed wall sculptures made from feathers, bones, rusty nails, spent gun cartridges, broken crockery, old jewellery and even partridge claws in silver leaf.

It also includes paintings: a series depicting old frames she recovered from a back store of the Fine Art Society gallery, and another series inspired by excess stock at 'Tom Corrie's furniture store' near Crocketford, piled high and decaying "like bones in an open graveyard".

Living in the heart of the Dumfriesshire countryside, Silvy is never short of materials or inspiration for her work. She frequently receives



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“little love gifts” of boxes of bird heads or claws from her husband Ben - and dead foxes have been left on her doorstep.

“I was given a dead cockerill at a parent council meeting once, and an old friend sent me the remains of her dead cat through the post. I do get some interesting packages at times.”

Luckily, Silvy is far from squeamish, plucking birds and cleaning bones herself (macerating the carcasses in soapy water for several days in a large pot in her Aga): “Death is part of life. We have a farm and live off the land, eating our own livestock, so I’m confronted by death all the time. I’m very frank about it.”

A ‘bone museum’ sits on a staircase windowsill of Silvy’s home and, as a 15-year-old, she bought a stuffed squirrel. “I always wanted to be an artist but I remember thinking I might also like to be either a musician or a taxidermist.”

She got closer to that ambition in 2013 when she embarked on a course with leading Scottish taxidermist George Jamieson, at Crammond: “He is incredibly talented, so knowledgeable about wildlife, nature and habitat.

“I’d been working with feathers for a while and wanted to extend my practice into bones. I’d found a dead cat at the roadside while I was on a community litter pick and thought I’d like to see what I could do with it.”

The course taught Silvy about cleaning and treating bones and claws and inspired her ▶

**Silvy Weatherall in her studio at Crochmore House near Irongray; below: working on a mandala made with grouse skulls; opposite page: Brace Brace and Teal Wheel are both part of the Another Man’s Treasure exhibition at the Fine Art Society Gallery in Edinburgh**





But as she became fully absorbed in motherhood, having a further three children - Barley, now 19, Martha, 16, and Walter, 15 - and moving to the current family home Crochmore House, near Irongray, she gave up working as a practising artist for 10 years, instead turning her creative talents to “making 101 things with glue and a cardboard box” with her children.

“I was always creative, just in different ways. Music has always been a passion and I continued singing with Dalgarno Singers and Dumfries Choral Society. I really relished being a full-time mum.”

But Silvy’s “fingers began to itch” and she started tinkering with feathers at the kitchen table when her children were asleep, using them to make handmade cards which she sold at craft fairs. Realising that her children had a feather allergy, she moved into her farmyard studio and extended her working practice: “It was scary going back into practice after being a full-time mum for 10 years. I had no self confidence.”

The walls of Crochmore offer a wonderful cross section of Silvy’s work over the various stages of her career: “I feel content when I’m living with different aspects of my working practice through the ages,” she says.

“It’s a bit like changing my handwriting. It’s all still me looking at things, just interpreting them in a different way.”

With her children now “happy, secure, free-thinking, good people”, Silvy reflects on her own current position, saying: “This feels like a really exciting stage in my life.”

Silvy’s exhibition, *Another Man’s Treasure* is on show at The Fine Art Society in Edinburgh, 6 Dundas Street, Edinburgh, until November 12. [www.silvart.co.uk](http://www.silvart.co.uk); [www.fasedinburgh.com](http://www.fasedinburgh.com)

‘deconstructed taxidermy’, where she lays out the bones of a creature in a new form. In one piece, a badger skeleton becomes a coat of arms, in another, a bird’s bones form a flamenco dancer.

And her ‘tributes’ to the animals don’t shy away from how they died: the badger’s fractured collarbone is clearly visible in its piece.

“At times it’s like crime scene investigation,” says Silvy. “When I looked at the cat skeleton my friend sent me, I found out how it had died. There was a clear impact wound and a broken vertebrae.”

Silvy is happy to mix her 3D work with painting, which she sees as a perfect antidote to the precise organised work on skeletons and feathers. “I love painting. I find it challenging and you can carry on having a conversation with a painting, it’s never really finished.”

In fact, it was painting that Silvy first studied at art school in Camberwell, London, but she moved into sculpture in her second year: “I was very young and a straightforward figurative painter when I started but the college was going through a highly conceptual stage. I felt much happier in the sculpture studios.”

Spending her early married life in Hong Kong, the Philippines and Sydney, Australia, Silvy painted and exhibited anthropological work; fascinated by the people she met and what they represented.

Taking her first baby, Ida, now 21, to the park in Sydney, she also studied ‘park life’ in a series of paintings.

**Silvy with a tup she formed out of an old corrugated tin shed**



**Gilding partridge feet with silver leaf for a piece called Partridge Tree**