

at home with

SILVY WEATHERALL

The renowned artist, Silvy Weatherall, makes work that is defined by the materials she uses. **Fiona Armstrong**, broadcaster and Lord Lieutenant of Dumfries, talks to her about how she finds beauty in objects that are easily overlooked

Photography by Gilberto Martinez

"She can roast a mean leg of Scottish mutton. Or make an exotic partridge tagine with Moroccan seasoning and prunes. Silvy Weatherall is an Aga goddess. Her mission is to feed, but this woman can stuff a bird in more ways than one. Silvy is a trained taxidermist. She can dismantle a rusty corrugated iron shed and weld it into a life-sized sheep. Such skills are useful. 'My husband married me for my tool kit...'

Her large and comfortable home in the Dumfriesshire hills is open house for family and friends. Here she can sing jazz, or harvest vegetables from her vegetable garden, or fund raise for charities close to her heart. Here she can raid the fancy-dress cupboard to party...



In between times, Silvy Weatherall paints and stuffs. She moulds and welds. She sculpts and photographs. Some artists concentrate on one thing. Not this one. 'My brain won't let me. I work in series and skip about artistically. But I am a good time keeper and I still get the meals on the table.' Silvy specialises in turning waste into objects of desire. Where there's muck there's money. A piece of work can fetch thousands of pounds. Married to a game dealer, the by-products of Ben Weatherall's business have come in useful.

On our visit to her Scottish country home the sun bursts through the windows. Inside the late-Victorian farmhouse is an eclectic mix of the homely and the bizarre. Jars of daffodils add colour whilst animal skulls give a hint of danger.

Classical music fills the kitchen. In the sitting room a piano plays itself. As we start our tour of the house Silvy gives us a tune of her own. She regularly sang jazz in a Honk Kong night club and performed with a famous pianist in London. She bubbles round, showing treasures, not least her vast collection of song books. But it is her art that is becoming increasingly collectable.

Here in the Dumfriesshire hills Silvy uses bird and animal parts to fashion very different genres. A wild creature is immortalised by bleached bones. A circle of partridge feet is gilded with silver leaf. A jewelled wild goat skull graces the hall. 'I haven't thrown out any broken jewellery since I was sixteen.' Food meets art in this house. 'I get love gifts from my husband. Once he gave me five hundred grouse heads which I put in the Aga to render the flesh off them. We shoot, pluck, cook and eat - then I turn them into pretty objects. I like to get my hands dirty.'

Cleaning out animal brains is not everyone's idea of a good time. A red squirrel lies in the freezer waiting for artistic attention. Three badgers, victims of roadkill, are rotting in the wood. When the bones are picked clean she will deal with them. She is in good company. The artist Georgia O'Keefe also collected bones in the desert. But this is more than art. This is an absolute fear of waste. 'I am a receptacle for junk. People give me their old rubbish and I turn it into things that others want. I am not a buyer of things. I am a maker. I worry about environmental issues. I hate just discarding something.'

Silvy calls herself an indiscriminate collector. Bones, skulls, nails, screws and feathers - they can all have an artistic use. In the dining room are two Canadian elk horns given by a helicopter pilot she met in an ice cream parlour in Suffolk. Here, a stuffed owl peeps perched on top of a curtain pole. She likes keys, especially rusty ones which she transfers the burnt-orange coloured oxide onto canvas. Then there are the broken things.

"My husband married me for my tool kit..."

'I've never thrown away any cracked or damaged china. These pieces are like the wrinkles on my face. Each one tells a story and I'm not going to try to iron it out.'

Influenced by the 'Arte Povera' movement where artists explore unconventional techniques and everyday materials, Silvy uses a Japanese technique using gold leaf to carefully stick pieces of broken china together to create a multi-coloured monster egg.

She has plans for the collection of saw-blades dumped at her back door. She likes the way the sun shines on the metal in her studio in a converted barn.

'It's a bit like a kid's playroom, but instead of Lego, I have bones and feathers and broken china. I like to re-purpose things.'

Does she ever throw anything away? 'Yes, but reluctantly. When I work I have to have a collection of stuff. You can't make anything out of one piece. But if you have a lot of pieces you can make a castle.'

And so badger bones find a resting place under glass. Spent cartridges offer a Christmas wreath with a difference. A gathering of wild heads makes a painted 'Stag's Do'. 'It's a pow wow. They're all





Above: xxxx

having a chat. There's always a pattern to what I do.'

I ask if she is influenced by another artist obsessed with animal parts. 'I do sometimes think, I'll do this and then find Damien Hirst has got there first. I wanted to create something with my used scalpel collection. Then I discovered he had already been there. The difference is that Hirst's work is conceptual, whereas mine is pretty self-explanatory. I want people to respond naturally, not necessarily intellectually.'

There is a softer side to Weatherall's work. A painting of Imelda Marcos's shoes shows a sexy, feminine image. Silvy herself has over 100 hats. She shows me a large cupboard stuffed with costumes and dons an outrageous curly wig. 'It's my alter ego. I've given talks about my hat collection.'

There's a lot of laughter in this house. In the sitting room she unveils a bookcase that opens out to a secret inner room. Over the fireplace is a painting of Chinese ladies with extraordinary hats, but no faces. These are the 'Hakka Women', visible, but invisible. 'I did a whole series in Hong Kong of people's position in society.'

The daughter of an architect and a writer, Silvy Weatherall is 49 years old.

She knew she wanted to be an artist from the age of four.

Trained in Fine Art at Camberwell, her first show was a sellout. It gave her enough money for a one-way ticket to travel around the Philippines where she painted her 'Women in White' series.

She and Ben lived in Hong Kong and Australia before moving to his family farm in south-west Scotland. It gave the children a base and her an appreciation of the countryside.

'Although born in the south, my mother is from Biggar, and my maiden name was Johnston, so it was like coming home. When I resumed work I did a series of agricultural paintings to try to understand the land. It gave me a sense of time in the year.'

After the birth of her first child Silvy stopped work for ten years, throwing herself into family and local life. The youngest was five when she restarted her artistic journey and since then, the commissions have flown in.

She's been photographic artist-in-residence in Brittany and Spain and won Creative Scotland awards which sent her on a course with Scotland's famous taxidermist, George Jamieson and to learn how to weld with blacksmith John Gibson.

The show, 'A Body of Parts', allowed her to demonstrate her skill with animal bits. 'Another Man's Treasure' showed last year at the Fine Art Society in Edinburgh

'I make something out of nothing. It's exhilarating working with expensive oils and canvas, but I'm proud of the fact that I work with stuff that has no use or value.'

"I am a receptacle for junk. People give me their old rubbish and I turn it into things that others want"

Future plans include a London exhibition and getting a bigger studio at home so she can create bigger works and collect more things. So how would she like to be remembered?

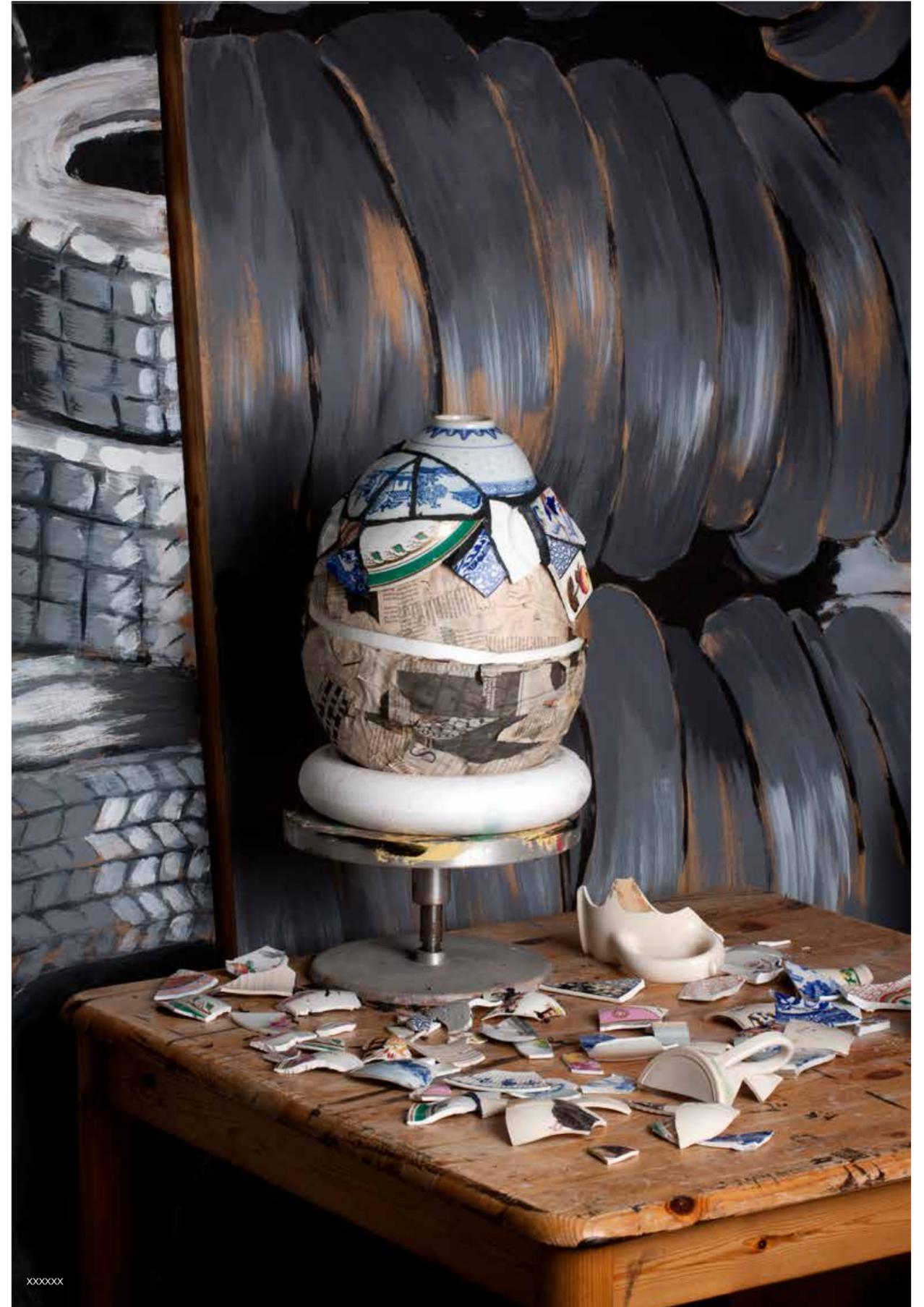
'with a house full of art and music and always a welcoming kiss on my my doorstep. The greatest legacy I can leave is a delight in the everyday.'

Before we leave Silvy shows me the Gypsy Rose Lee caravan "Donna" she bought for a thousand pounds from a showman's family in Kent.

'Men have sheds. My space is on wheels. We have parties in here, but it's where I read and paint. I'm a gypsy at heart.'

She lets us look into the crystal ball given to her on their thirteenth wedding anniversary by husband, Ben. We gaze into the glass. The future seems pretty clear...

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