

Totally wired

Avian enthusiast and artist Celia Smith uses wire where other artists use line. Diana Woolf finds out what first inspired her to use old telephone cable to create sculpture

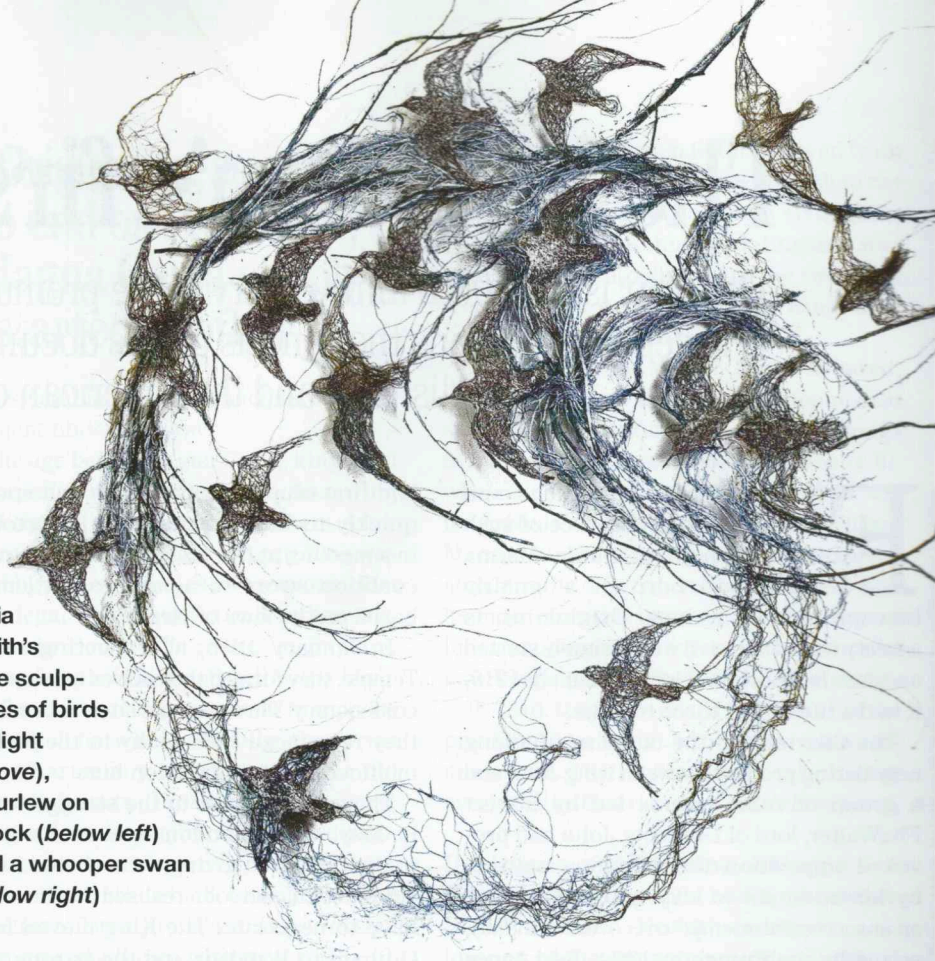
CELIA SMITH is an artist with a fascination for birds. Seagulls and waders are a favourite and she spends weeks at a time watching and drawing them at reserves such as Slimbridge, Gloucestershire, and Skokholm Island off the Welsh coast. 'I grew up on a farm and was naturally attracted to birds. I looked after sick chicks as a child and once adopted a sparrow that had fallen out of its nest.' Celia's other love is modelling with wire and the two came together after she left Wimbledon School of Art, where she studied Fine Art Sculpture.

On returning to her parents' farm after graduation, she began to experiment with wire: 'There was always loads of it lying around, so it was cheap and easy to get hold of.' She started to use it to make sculptures of the domestic birds she saw on the farm, then, on an impulse, she entered one of her pieces into a show at her local art centre and was soon swamped with orders. 'I spent the next two years making wire chickens,' she laughs.

To escape, Celia travelled to New Zealand for a year and it was here that she first started bird-watching seriously. Returning home in 2001, she continued her birding trips and these fed directly into her sculpture. The result was a dramatically expanded cast of strikingly life-like birds, including long-legged oystercatchers, plump guillemots and nervy-looking curlews, in addition to her farmyard geese and hens.

'The wire gives the sculptures a sense of lightness and movement that you wouldn't get if you used other materials,' Celia tells me. She has an extraordinary affinity with wire, enjoying its immediacy and deftly manipulating it to create structures that are full of energy. And although she takes a drawing book on her bird-watching trips—capturing

Celia Smith's wire sculptures of birds in flight (above), a curlew on a rock (below left) and a whooper swan (below right)



gestures and details on paper—she will often also create little wire studies in the field.

She much prefers this form of handmade and hand-drawn visual record to photography: 'I don't really like using photographs as I find the results too staid and too detailed. I get to understand how a bird moves and flies much better if I try to capture it on paper.'

Each sculpture starts with a single piece of wire bent into a basic framework. 'I start with a leg, then go up into the body, down into the next leg and back into the body again until it has enough strength to support it,' she explains. This is then built up using more wire to the required density and level of detail. Some pieces are carefully finished, with beautifully worked features, but others are more gestural, full of implied rather than actual detail.

Celia prefers to work the wire by hand rather than with pliers. 'I do have quite muscley hands,' she admits wryly. As well as free-standing sculptures, she also creates wall-hung pieces—what she calls wire drawings. These are easier to make as there's no supporting framework: 'They're much freer, so I can concentrate on the essence of the bird without having to worry about making it stand up.'

Although, on first impression, Celia's wire creations are all about line, colour and texture are just as important. 'There's a lot of variety within the wire I use. I source it from scrapyards, where you can find all sorts of different types, from coloured, plastic-coated wire to rusty, quite weathered examples. All wires are different and all make different types of line.' Thus, her alert-looking Arctic tern has its

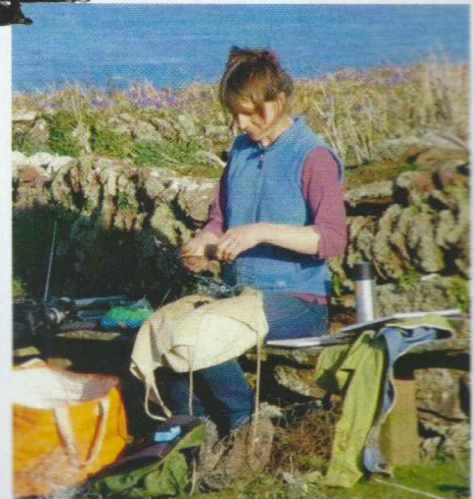
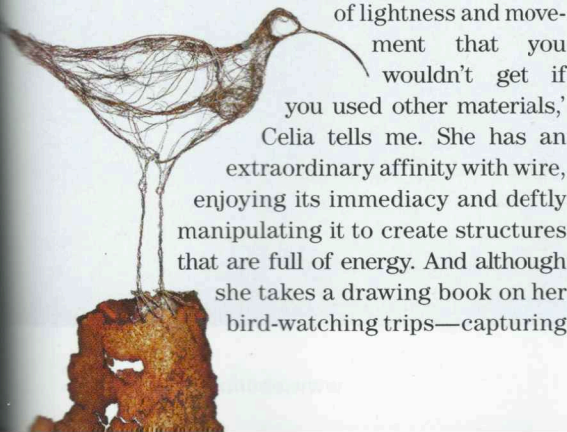
orange beak and claws made from copper wire, in careful contrast to its stainless-steel gauze body, and the vivid colour on a peacock's breast is hinted at with a lattice of blue telephone cabling.

These subtle differences in colour and texture allow Celia to create a clearly identifiable and 'living' creature. Each sculpture demonstrates both her instinctive love of birds and her almost scientific knowledge of their behaviour. 'Birds keep on inspiring me—the more I go out and draw them, the more I see and the more ideas I get.' Long may that creative cycle last.

Visit <http://celia-smith.co.uk>. Celia is represented by Leonora Martin Fine Art (07880 746231; www.leonoramartin.co.uk)



John Taylor/Peter Stone



The artist at work on Skokholm Island