

'Flying Swifts'



BIRDS OF A FEATHER

USING OLD, FOUND WIRE AND CABLING CELIA SMITH MAKES ELEGANT BIRD SCULPTURES THAT CAPTURE THE PARTICULAR CHARACTER OF EACH WINGED CREATURE. DIANA WOOLF SPOKE TO HER

Artist Celia Smith's wonderfully life-like birds are what she calls 'three dimensional drawings'. From flocks of lapwings to graceful peacocks and jittery curlews, she uses wire as other artists would use a pencil. She's made a successful career which includes installations for Wilderness festival and the Lund Gallery along with numerous exhibitions across the UK, that combines both her love of birds with creating art.

When did you first start making?

I was born on a farm and I've always been someone who picks up materials lying around and makes things - from mud pies onwards really. When I was about 14 I was introduced to the work of the artist Sophie Ryder who makes wire sculptures, so I then went home and started making things out of old bits of chicken wire and junk metal. We had a pretty healthy scrap heap with bits of old tractor and other pieces which I could use.

The characterful 'Walking Heron' made from steel wire and telephone cabling.



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'I SAT IN THE MIDDLE OF A PUFFIN COLONY AND LITERALLY MADE SCULPTURES WHILE THE BIRDS WERE AROUND ME.'

How did you convert a love of making into a career as a professional artist?

After school I did a degree in sculpture at Wimbledon School of Art where I experimented with all sorts of different techniques and materials before coming back to wire and metal. When I got back home after leaving college I could continue work, using the materials I found there. I made wire chickens, which were inspired by those I saw on the farm, and these did really well commercially, so I spent the next two years making them.

What made you move on from chickens and start working on wild birds?

I got bored of the chickens and ended up going to New Zealand for a year to escape them! Whilst there I explored the countryside and started drawing the birds I saw. When I returned to the UK I continued going on bird-watching trips and sketching everything I saw. I had always loved drawing, but had never seen it as part of my work until then. I realised I could use pencil lines as a starting point to create sculptures.

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How do you translate what you see on these bird-watching trips into sculptures?

I often take some wire with me, which I work on in the field. On a recent visit to the bird sanctuary at Skokholm Island I sat in the middle of a puffin colony and literally made sculptures while the birds were around me – it's a really good way of referencing them as the birds are moving all the time so you can correct the sculptures while you watch. I finish them off in the studio but try and keep them as raw as possible so as not to lose their sense of vigour and life.

Why do you enjoy working with wire so much?

It's an immediate material and working with it is like doing a drawing or making a line, but with the added excitement of taking it into three-dimensional form. Scrap and found objects have the same immediacy – you have an object right from the start whereas things like carving and casting take much longer to get any results.

(top) 'Robin' made from telephone cabling, copper wire and an old wooden reel.

(above, left) Celia working on 'Scream of Swifts'.





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'Curlew on a Rock' – copper, steel wire and found tin.

What are your favourite wires?

I am attracted to old pieces of wire because of their tones and textures. I particularly love corroded copper with that lovely green Verdigris colour and I also like copper which has been slightly burnt, as it's very malleable and goes a wonderful pinky orange.

Do you use anything else?

Telephone cabling is another favourite as you get lovely stripy wires, often yellow and orange, which is great for beaks. And I love really rusty chicken wire as it seems to soften a lot when

it's old so it's easy to shape. More recently, I have been using bits I've found on my drawing trips. I used some old tin off the beach at Skokholm as a perch for a bird I saw there – the tin physically connects the bird to the island.

Where do you find your materials?

I get a lot from scrap yards, although nowadays it's not so easy to pick up interesting bits because of the price, and health and safety regulations mean you are not allowed to wander around scrap yards unsupervised. I buy quite a lot new, and sometimes friendly BT men replacing the old telephone ➡



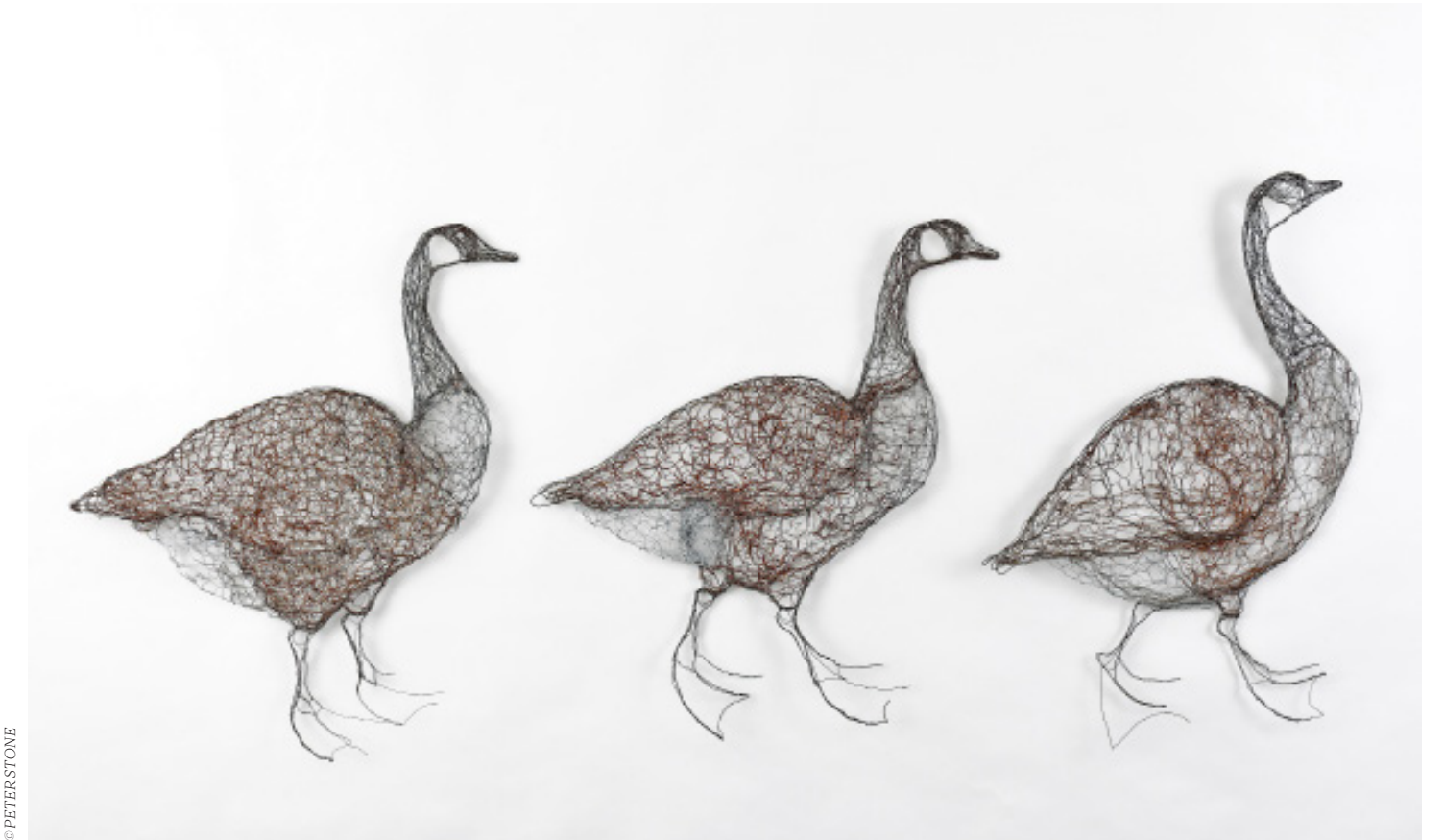
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Celia captures the graceful movement of birds in 'Flying Dunlin'.



(opposite page) 'Flying Dunlin' - this time made with Tunnock teacake wrappers, steel and copper wire, birch twigs and old wire netting.

(this page) Celia used steel wire and old wire netting for 'Three Canada Geese'.



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cabling give me pieces of lovely coloured copper wire. And I am always collecting bits of foil and wrappers which I think might be useful one day.

How important is it for you to incorporate recycled elements into your work?

I come from a family of where making do and mending was natural and so definitely have an environmental conscience. I love that I can use recycled things in my work.

Tell us about your most recent project.

I've just finished an installation for a House of Fraser store in a new retail park at Rushden Lakes, Northamptonshire, called 'A Ponderance of Plovers'. The store is next to a nature reserve famous for its huge flocks of lapwings, so I've used these birds as my starting point. It's the largest piece I've ever made - roughly 12 metres long - and made up of 50 wire birds flying above the store's escalators. 🐦

» For more information visit celia-smith.co.uk

'SOMETIMES FRIENDLY BT MEN REPLACING OLD CABLING GIVE ME PIECES OF LOVELY COLOURED COPPER WIRE.'

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