# ART *from the* SCRAPHEAP

*Helen Denerley transforms worn, rusty farmyard equipment into complex sculptures that capture the beauty of the wildlife outside her remote studio*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **ANDREW MONTGOMERY**

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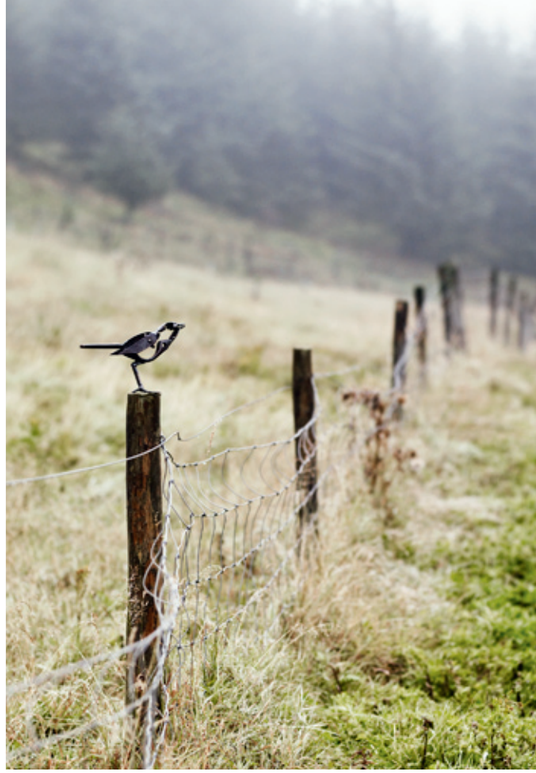
Drills and vices; an electric arc welder for thick metal and a gas welding torch for the thin kind; two angle grinders, one for cutting, one for grinding: Helen Denerley's studio is stocked with tools more usually found in a mechanic's workshop than an artist's. But then there's nothing conventional about her work: she's been making sculpture out of metal salvage for more than 32 years, the last 17 of them in an isolated Aberdeenshire farmstead between the rivers Dee and Don. Living in this landscape, she observes animals out in the wild – majestic deer, springing hares and leaping fish – as well as studying sheep, birds, horses and dogs in order to capture them with startling accuracy in sheared-off panels from old agricultural vehicles and the coils of car suspension springs.

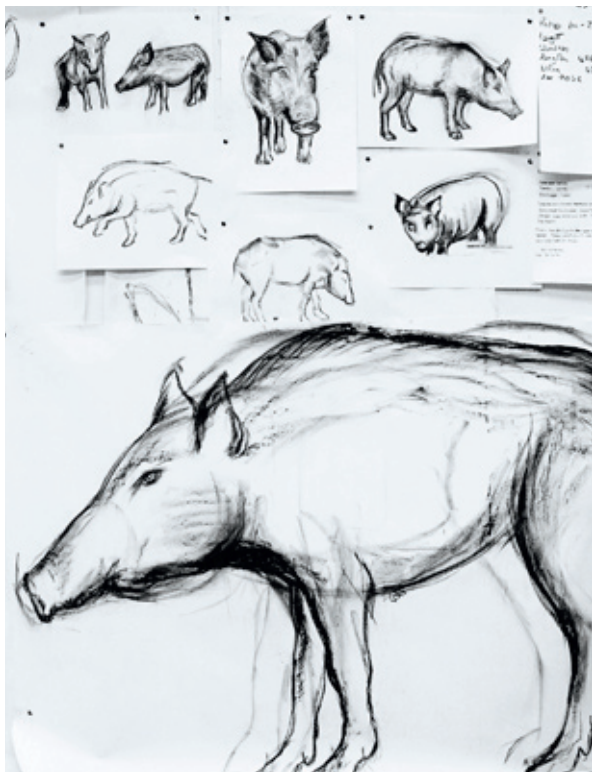
It's a rugged match between the natural and the industrial, which suits her determinedly unsentimental approach. There's nothing whimsical about her creatures, and she dislikes the word 'alchemy', with its suggestion of magical transformation rather than the sheer hard graft of working with scaffolding, scrap metal and heavy-duty equipment. "It doesn't happen overnight," she says. "I spend as long just standing and looking at bits of scrap as I do welding them into their finished form. It's not a cosy life – and it means taking risks."

Helen started out on her career when she left art school in the late 1970s, opting for a creative life with no secure income; and she made a further leap of faith with this house which, when she moved in with her two small daughters in 1992, was more or less a ruin – stone walls with no roof, plumbing or electricity. It's five miles from the village shop, half an hour's drive from the nearest supermarket – and, at 1,100ft up in the Cairngorms National Park – in winter it's likely to be cut off by snow any time from November onwards. But it also stands in about 23 acres of its own land and the only other visible house is half a mile away. The slow process of turning the building into a habitable four-bedroom dwelling (which involved living in a caravan for the first two years until plumbing was eventually installed) was a small price to pay for the wildlife outside her door. "Everything is dictated by the seasons up here, so you're very aware of the changing landscape and migrating birds."

Being immersed in this natural environment is the reason she never switches off, she says. There's no line between domestic life and work life, and while her partner, painter and photographer Peter Welch, has a separate studio in a shed, you have to go through Helen's to get to the house. "This is all I do," she states. And her art school training provided her with good tools for such a pared-back existence: its emphasis on drawing and its facilities for practical skills underpinned her creative instinct with something more rigorous and disciplined. "Learning to ▷

THIS PAGE The farmhouse stands in more than 20 acres of its own land. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The welding demands great skill; local birdlife is a constant source of inspiration; Helen spends hours selecting the right shapes; old chains make a versatile material





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**Helen collects a large amount of scrap from local farms and garages; she always starts by making a detailed drawing so that every sculpture is an accurate representation of the animal; the coils of old car suspension springs form the body of a ram**

*"I spend just as long standing and looking at bits of scrap as I do welding them together into their finished form," Helen says*

weld with a quarter-inch steel rod was like drawing a line in space – and that's what I'm still doing now."

The skill is particularly clear in delicate pieces like her dragonfly, whose wings – two pairs either side of an elongated body of brass chandelier pieces – were 'drawn' in molten brass. But it is just as important in accurately recreating a life-size deer or a wild boar; getting the turn of the head or the stretch of a tautened leg muscle. "I draw until it's right, until I really know the thing and can see the finished animal in my mind's eye – that's why it's so lifelike," Helen explains. It doesn't always involve making new sketches from life – sometimes she draws from imagination – but it's the shape of the figure that drives her choice of materials from the scrap pile outside her studio. "What it's made of is less important than getting the form right," she says. "I usually start with the head, hanging it from a strengthened beam so that I can get it at the right height as soon as possible. Next, I move to the feet, then gradually I link up all the different pieces."

However, the idea that this is just a process of joining up the dots belies both the subtlety and the technical complexity of Helen's work. She tack-welds the parts provisionally until she is happy with them – she will have several animals on the go at once, so she never knows how long she will be working on any one piece. Sometimes it takes time to see what the problem is, she says: it could need a dramatic alteration such as removing and realigning the head, or it might require her to make a segment bigger or smaller. Not until the whole thing is right – and she has checked that each part is strong enough to support the weight it has to hold – does she weld it into a rigid structure.

In the meantime, she sometimes uses a scaffold to hold the partial skeleton in place while she finds the exact piece to complete a joint or body-part. Her scrap is filed as carefully as a library, and she knows where to lay her hands on a particular shape: garden shears (whose blades are used for birds' tail feathers) in the first row on the right; bicycle chains (used recently to make tails for a pair of squirrels) in the middle row, halfway along. "Chains are wonderfully versatile because you can twist them into the shape you want, but you have to weld every link." Overlapping washers become the scales of a fish, scaffold clips are welded into metal birds and the head of her dragonfly is made from gas welder torch cylinder gauges – a neat twist by which the tool is absorbed into the thing it creates.

She is keen, though, not to claim any unjustified credit as a ▷

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**"Learning to weld with a quarter-inch steel rod was like drawing a line in space," Helen says; completed pieces are cleaned with a wire brush; a dragonfly created from pieces of an old brass chandelier, with the delicate wings 'drawn' in molten brass**

*There's nothing whimsical about her creatures and she dislikes the word 'alchemy' with its suggestion of magic rather than hard graft*

recycler. "I recycle at home as much as the next person but this is not about doing the world a service. It's about art – seeing unexpected beauty in objects." Much of her scrap is from local farms and garages. Some parts are limited-availability now, because the vehicles or machines just aren't made anymore. A few designs can be repeat-commissioned if Helen knows the specific part she wants – such as a ram with the body of a chunky old-fashioned pillar radiator – but most of her sculpture depends on the right bit turning up. "I'm always on the search for pairs – things such as motorcycle gear-change levers that I use for deer jaws, but for which I need two identical pieces," she says. "I once found a single car door that had just the right curve for a body, but I needed the other side, too, and didn't know what type of car it came from." So she trawled the streets until she found it (a Ford Focus) and bought an old one from a scrap dealer.

Most of her work is in steel – cleaned with a wire brush once the piece is complete and sometimes allowing patches of original paint to show through. Helen might let the red from an old Massey Ferguson tractor emerge or reveal the green from discarded plough spokes. "Farmers can usually recognise the make of vehicle I've used from its colour," Helen says. She then finishes the piece with a layer of clear acrylic lacquer. One of her scaffold clip birds would cost around £250 from a gallery, but sheep commissions are around £6,000 and deer up to £12,000. She makes pieces for public exhibitions and has at least one solo show a year as well as selling through a number of galleries – her animals find homes all over the UK, usually installed by the sculptor herself.

Helen's own world is measured and plainly furnished, but not spartan. Despite her insistence that this is not a cosy existence, the spillover of life into work gives the studio a down-to-earth homeliness. There's a woodburning stove rumbling away behind the huge metal workbenches; the smell of coffee mingles with the smoky fumes of the electric welder; and Helen's workshop cat, Scarface Claw, and seven-year-old lurcher cross, Molly, will both sleep happily undisturbed by the noise of the grinders and the hissing of the gas welding torch. "We eat breakfast in the workshop, and when the children were younger they used to come home from school and have tea here," she says. "My space isn't private – it's part of life." And her beautiful, lifelike animals make it feel part of the landscape beyond, too.

*To see more of Helen's work, visit www.helendenerley.co.uk.*