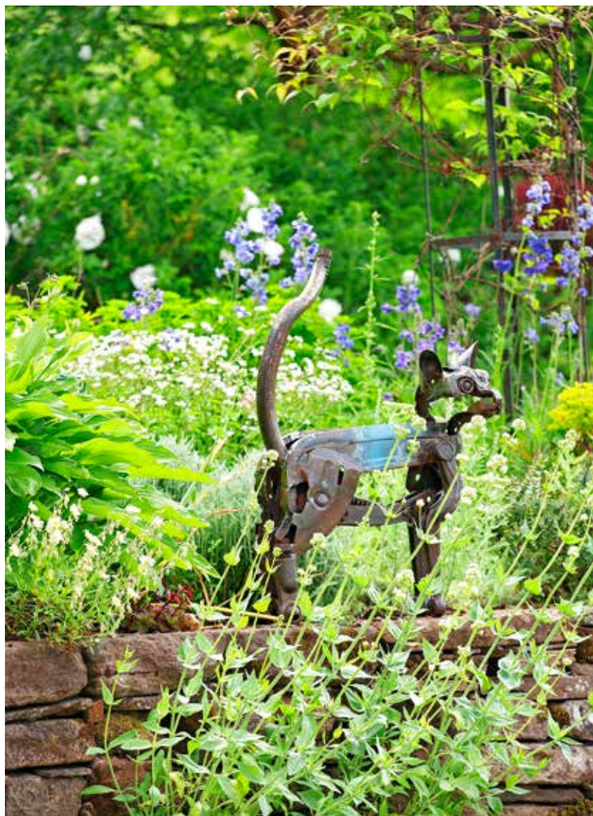
BRINGING METAL TO LIFE

Highland artist Helen Denerley creates fluidity and movement with scrapyard pieces in her lifelike animal sculptures



Against the majestic Highland landscape, the russet outline of Elvis the bull still makes an impact (above left). A bird of prey, its feathers in fringed metal, ready to pounce from a shelving post (above right).

T IS A bright, sunny May morning in the eastern Highlands. Birds sing, and the air is fresh and pure. Artist Helen Denerley is working outdoors on a life-sized sculpture of an Aberdeen Angus bull, named Elvis. Perched on a hillside at the end of a mile-long track, with fields of rushes and grass rising to meet stands of Scots pine and larch set against a heather-covered moor, her outdoor studio, a simple concrete platform, is perfectly suited to Elvis. A stag stands behind him, while an eagle looks down from a shelf. Despite being anchored in place, this bull is so full of life that it is easy to imagine him wandering off to graze in the nearby field.

The shelves piled high with scrap, set into the side of the hill, are a reminder that this magnificent beast is made entirely from recycled metal, rising to life from discarded pieces of agricultural machinery, old cars and rusty bicycles. Meanwhile, Helen, wearing goggles and ear defenders, stands on a block, grinding over welds to create a smooth final finish.

Defining the boundaries of Helen's studio in this remote Strathdon glen, in western Aberdeenshire, is a challenge. Gregarious by nature, she nonetheless relishes the isolation and the daily communion with the wildlife that inspires her work. Deer, otters, Song thrushes, sparrows, buzzards, ravens, starlings and cuckoos thrive locally, sharing the peace and tranquillity of this sunny day, but also the rigours of the long, dark Highland winters. Sheep graze on the hill, and the burn is a magnet for herons, ducks and dippers.

Helen's finished sculptures find temporary homes in her garden, but some, like her favourite ape, are too evocative to part with. A sheep, fashioned from a radiator, grazes happily; a stag views the hill opposite; a trio of hinds munch companionably. Down by the burn, an otter overlooks the water, while Tatty Sprocket, Helen's cat, immortalised in scrap metal, wanders along a low, stone wall.

From old to new

Helen often works on more than one sculpture simultaneously. A goshawk is taking shape alongside Elvis, and she continues to add to the row of characterful starlings perched on a garden fence. "I have several pieces on the go at any one time. If I'm working on a big piece, and I am struggling with a creative decision, the best thing to do is to walk away and do something else," she explains. "I will still see the problem out of the corner of my eye, and time will usually provide a solution."

The light frame of a bird of prey, such as the goshawk, she explains, acts in contrast to the heavy frame of the bull. ›

Helen Denerley takes a break with one of her animal companions: an ape fashioned in a sitting pose, which she made from motorcycle frames.

Working on smaller projects, such as the starlings, allows her the space and the time to think.

Different kinds of scrap works well, from cars, motorbikes and agricultural machinery, such as tractors and ploughs. Elvis, in particular, features parts of a plough, in reference to his agricultural roots. "I find the scrap from all sorts of local sources, and people are very good at looking out pieces for me," says Helen. Piles and shelves, which look like a tangled mess to outsiders, are in fact stacked in an orderly manner, allowing Helen to quickly and easily locate the right piece. "I know exactly where everything is. The scrap pile is my library."

Years of practice and a deep knowledge of anatomy have taught her which piece of scrap will be suited to a particular animal. She can identify a certain shape from the pile, which, to the untrained eye, might look like a random piece. "If someone has commissioned a deer, I'll look at the scrap pile and find something relevant to a deer; if I see a piece that might work for something else, I'll put it aside and remember it. I can spend many hours in my scrap pile, just gazing at shapes, until the right piece presents itself," she explains, although she happily admits that for two or three months in winter, heavy snow can make it difficult for her to find things.

A 1977 graduate of Gray's School of Art in Aberdeen, Helen always enjoyed working with metal. The move to using scrap, for an artist keen on conservation, was a natural progression. "I realised there were artistic possibilities in discarded pieces of metal. They have their own story and unique shape, and often bring more visual depth to a sculpture," she explains.

"As full of spirit as the month of May
And gorgeous as the sun at midsummer;
Wanton as youthful goats, wild as young bulls"

William Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part 1*

In 1992, Helen bought an L-shaped steading. "It was just a ruin on the hillside, with no walls, roof or road," she says. The steading roof was removed after the Second World War, she adds, in avoidance of roof taxes: an allowance accorded due to inaccessibility. Living nearby, she knew this south side of the glen was always bathed in sunshine, and so she persuaded the farmer to sell it to her.

Mindful of the need to earn a living, Helen first built her workshop, with a loft living space for herself and her two daughters, until she could convert the other half of the steading into a home. "It was an adventure for the children: a time of generators and candles," she says. This indoor studio is the one she still uses today; its tables are strewn with scrap and tools, each one with a clearly defined purpose. The studio testifies to the detailed research at the heart of her work. A spacious workshop, filled with light and music, and the aroma of fresh coffee, it is warmed in winter and on chilly spring days by a wood stove. Drawings, which she sees as an essential part of making sculpture, are festooned over the walls, to be used as reference and scale, and to help her understanding of the animals. Apart from the anatomy, she takes great care to consider the pose of a creature, working out how it moves and at what speed, and how it relates to humans and other animals.

The tools of the trade: two angle grinders, one for cutting, the other for grinding; and a drill, with a wire brush attachment for cleaning, are laid out, in reach, on a table. "You also need gloves and pliers to hold hot pieces," says Helen. Using pliers, she plays around with pieces, fixing them temporarily in place on a metal bench or the concrete floor until she is ready to start tacking them together.

Scotland is the perfect home for a stag which has seemingly emerged from the undergrowth, its head reared. The lichen-patterned antlers add a naturalistic feel.

Large-scale pieces

A large project, such as Elvis, starts with the head, which might be made on a bench. Then, the head will be hung from a block and tackle at the right height and position. From there, the rest of the anatomy is slowly defined and worked in from all sides to ensure three-dimensional integrity. "It isn't easy to position pieces of heavy metal in space, so all sorts of ingenious props are invented to serve the purpose," she says.

It took two people to attach Elvis's 2ft-long (61cm) head, at the correct height, to a pole, which was later removed. Supports were then attached around the bull, as and when they were needed, and removed as the structural requirements of the piece allowed. The aim, Helen stresses, is to capture an uninterrupted view of the form. "You have to be ingenious, as some stages of the work are precarious There is a degree of engineering involved in order to work safely."

Helen has captured the fluid lines of an otter's body in the rigid metal and chosen to place it in its natural habitat by the water's edge.

The same technique applied to Helen's standout pair of giraffes, nicknamed Martha and Gilbert, which stand proudly at the top of Leith Walk in Edinburgh. While most of the sculptures are created in Helen's workshop, larger pieces, such as these, have to be assembled on-site, and a substantial scaffold was required, along with a cherry picker and a crane. "You have to be quite inventive about working in mid air; I use anything I find," she explains, adding that this is especially important with a piece weighing in tons.

When the head is finished, everything else falls into place, and her imagination takes over. "Once you have the head and the eyes, it's alive, and there is no going back," says Helen. Working with metal gives the construction process a rare degree of flexibility. "You can add and take away endlessly until it is exactly right; a process that would be impossible with wood or stone," she explains.

Positive space

The focus of Helen's work is to bring metal to life and create a sculpture which is both moving and thought-provoking. Years of experience have taught her to skilfully minimise the amount of metal required to express the individuality of each animal, ›

In a playful touch, an old radiator becomes the body of a ram in one of Helen's metal sculptures, illustrating her imagination and resourcefulness when utilising scrap items.

using only essential lines. This approach draws on the use of 'positive space', a term Helen has adopted for what would, in artistic circles, usually be described as 'negative space'. For Helen, the gaps between the pieces of metal are as important as the solid parts because they give the viewer the chance to fill them in using their own imagination. "What I leave out is as important as what I choose to put in," she says. "Because metal is such a strong material, it is possible to bring a lightness to the form and express movement in a way that almost defies the material it is made of."

A striking example of this is found in her wise, curious ape, assembled from two motorcycle frames. "He was made from very little, but your eye does the work, imagining what else might be there," explains Helen. But less means more in terms of precise work and exact measurements. "The less metal you put into a piece, the more accurate it has to be. The process is more complicated than it looks," she says.

The authenticity of Helen's technique was illustrated when a horse she made was introduced on several different occasions, and in different situations, to other horses in a field. "Horses are visual animals and, despite the gaps in the sculpture, they were disturbed by its presence and had to come close to see and smell for themselves that it was not a threat," she explains.

Although untested by fellow bulls, Elvis is representative of the real bull he is modelled on, despite being constructed of scrap metal. As a private commission, he was required to look like the real bull of that name, which Helen met and spent time measuring and photographing. On completion of her work, she was delighted when the farm grieve and the herdsman both approved the final result.

Elvis is largely made up of agricultural parts; his main back and belly are plough boards. His muscular shoulders and hips are assembled from Land Rover parts, alongside wishbones from different cars forming his neck and jaws. Large spanners run up the backs of his legs. His magnificent forehead is made from a shovel, while his eye sockets are scaffold clips, and his eyes are track rod ends. Shackles form the lips of the bull; his nose is another scaffold clip, and elevator cups are used for his ears. "The tail is made from unravelled steel rope, the feet are cattle drinking troughs, and the testicles are tanks from an old UK motorbike," adds Helen.

No two pieces are the same, and every sculpture presents its own challenge. Each one of her 26 starlings has been individually assembled from brake shoes, shelf brackets, and even scissors. A public commission, these are planned for a set of railings in Loanhead, Midlothian. "I am always happy to do public sculpture: not everyone can afford to own a work of art, and it gives me great pleasure to know that people can still have access to it," says Helen.

Welding and finishing

Once the decisions are made, and the final preparation is in place, the welding begins. This is a stage Helen is particularly fond of. "Through the goggles, you can see the hard metal melting and flowing, and you can move it around where you want it to go," she says.

She uses two different welding techniques: electric arc welding for thicker metal and for working with dissimilar metals, such as when welding steel to cast iron; and oxyacetylene welding for the more delicate parts. Electric arc welding, explains Helen, is a fairly fast and efficient way of joining the metal, but requires a complete face mask and eye protection for safety. "It is useful for tacking pieces together to see if they look right. You can hold the piece in one hand and weld with the other one," she says. Oxyacetylene welding takes longer and requires different skills to finish shapes and make seams ›

Wearing goggles for protection, Helen carries out some welding work on Elvis the bull in the fresh air next to her studio.

"Glowing more fervent, it doth bind more fast;
And melting both but makes the union sure"

James Jeffrey Roche

A row of starlings appear to interact, looking at each other inquisitively. The pieces allow the observer to almost detect movement as well as character in the individual forms.

disappear, allowing the eye to move uninterrupted over joins. "Oxyacetylene welding is joyous if you know how to do it properly," says Helen. The goggles she wears for welding in this way are of a different, lighter type. Once the welding is finished, grinding completes the sculpture. "These parts of the process are purely technical and, although it's hard, physical work, it is enjoyable in its mindlessness," she adds.

The final finish depends on the ultimate destiny of the piece. Public work, such as the starlings, are galvanised and painted to prevent them from rusting. A private piece will be lacquered. Agricultural metal is left in raw form; sometimes retaining the original coloured paint and adding to the character of the sculpture. Such pieces are given a final coat of clear lacquer.

Surrounded by ideas

Helen explains that commitment to her art means living life differently: the lifelong relationship between the art and the artist is sometimes all consuming. "As an artist, you are always thinking and developing new ideas at the back of your mind, even if you are unaware of it," she says. Ideas flow from an openness to life experience and are combined with collecting scrap, researching an idea, drawing, finding the right pieces, assembling, then building the piece. "It is a long and gradual process, and sometimes the making of the piece is the shortest part. You have to love everything you do."

After 30 years of living in this remote location, she continues to draw inspiration from her surroundings. Ideas come during a simple evening walk up the glen; a visit from a goshawk; a conversation with a friend; a poem; or just an item on the news. "What inspires me is being surrounded by nature: the seasonal changes, the wildlife, and my human part in all of that. I have plenty of time to ponder on the bigger questions of our part in nature and our effect on it," she says.

Helen's choice of lifestyle, she admits, is not always easy. Even with a four-wheel drive car, she often spends many weeks snowed in during the winter. "It takes energy and commitment, but the rewards are huge," she explains.

It is the creative process, the challenge and the satisfaction of finishing something that did not exist before, that Helen so enjoys about her work. "I stare at the scrap pile and think to myself: 'In a while from now, a bull will be standing there on the concrete'," she says. "His parts are all here, and I am the catalyst to creating him." ■

• **Words:** Antoinette Galbraith • **Photography:** Ray Cox Photography

CONTACT

https://helendenerley.co.uk
Details of the galleries which stock Helen's work can be found on her website.

Scrap metal, from wheels to pipes and hinges to cylinders, spills out of the shelves in Helen's workspace under the sky. The rust only helps to add realistic colour to some of the wildlife she creates.