

ArtisanDEE&DON

# METAL

## *menagerie*

Sculptor **Helen Denerley** uses scrap metal to create magnificent creatures that can be found all over the country. She spoke to **LIVING** about her work and inspirations.

By Laura Brown





CHANCES are you've spotted one of Helen Denerley's coterie of scrap metal animals on your travels.

Leading the herd are her magnificent giraffes, Martha and Gilbert, who tower gracefully on Leith Walk in Edinburgh, but around Scotland you'll also find cats and dogs, crows and oystercatchers, and even a family of wild boar, as well as many others further afield.

Proof that one man's rubbish is another woman's treasure, this sculptor's love affair with scrap metal began decades ago.

"It's been a long, slow, evolutionary process," she tells me, and while a bit of tractor might seem like junk to you or me, to Helen, there's infinite beauty and possibility on the scrap pile.

She can identify potential beaks, wings, hooves and snouts among all manner of jettisoned machinery. And as we chat, I begin to learn that part of the appeal of using this material is that it can never be completely tamed or twisted.

"Everything has a story, everything has had a previous life, and sometimes that's interesting. Or it might



*"Everything has a story and has had a previous life – and sometimes that's interesting"*



just be that it's a wonderful shape," says Helen.

"I suppose it's trying to strike a balance between whether I'm in control of manipulating metal to my end, or whether the scrap is in control, or at least contributes its own shape."

Listening to Helen describe the process of creating her sculptures, I imagine her playing a gigantic game of chess with her scrap.

"If you can find a piece to do the job, then it suggests the next move; it suggests that a certain shape would be better after that."

And so it continues, move after move, until checkmate: her sculpture is finished. Form, expression and movement are conveyed not

only by the metal, but by the areas that Helen leaves empty, allowing the viewer to fill in the gaps themselves.

"Even though most of my work isn't abstract – it's representational, usually of animals, so I'm always true to the anatomy of the animal – sometimes a piece of scrap is just the right shape to do the right job, and it will leave a beautiful negative space.

"I then call that 'positive space', because the space that's left between two pieces of scrap can be really unpredictable – I wouldn't design it like that, but the scrap suggests it."

Does a really intriguing piece of metal ever spark an idea for a new sculpture, I wonder?

"Absolutely. That is a question I get asked a lot – does it start with me having an idea and looking for a piece of scrap, or does the scrap suggest the form, and I would say it's both."

Every sculpture, no matter where the idea springs from, begins with meticulous research and drawings of her chosen subject.



*A flock of metal starlings*

When it comes to giraffes, camels and other exotic beasts, she heads online, visits zoos, and recalls past real-life encounters.

But much of the wildlife Helen builds from scrap can be seen around her home in Strathdon, Aberdeenshire.

During our conversation, I get the sense that although her hillside home is remote, it's far from lonely. As well as her house and studio at Clashnettie, which she renovated from a ruin, she also runs an adjacent residential arts centre, where creatives come to paint, write, play and ponder.

"It's quite nice to have a way of introducing other artistic input into the place. People come and sometimes we become friends, and maybe we even collaborate."



*Helen at work on the Gathering Tree*



*"What I want to do next is just have some fun and see where my scrap takes me"*

Some of the most interesting work I've done has been for collectors, or sold through galleries. But I really love the fact that those giraffes in Edinburgh can be seen by everybody."

During the pandemic, Helen has managed to maintain that balance.

"Last year, I did a private commission of a lifesize Aberdeen Angus bull, which was an enormous pleasure for me.

"I also made a set of starlings for railings in Loanhead; they're just there on the street, but people walking up and down that street won't expect to see some little birds, and then they see them and their faces light up. It's a joy to watch."

"The piece I'm working on at the moment is a bit of both really – it's a commission for a specific place, but it's for the Trees for Life rewilding centre, so it's open to the public. So that's lovely as well, and it's different for me."

That's because trees aren't Helen's usual subject matter, and she confesses, "I wondered how I'd get on – but I'm really enjoying it!"

Trees for Life's flagship rewilding centre at Dundreggan in the Highlands will open in 2023 and promises to be a world-class hub of education and exploration that showcases the charity's vital forest conservation work



Helen's collaborators over the years have included poets such as Michael Longley, Mandy Haggith and the late, great George Mackay Brown. She believes sculpture and poetry are natural bedfellows, "You start with a lot of bits, and then it's all about editing it down to only what you need and no more. In the case of poetry, it's words; with me, it's bits of metal.

"It's the silences in the line of the poem, and it's the gaps of air in the sculptures that take you to your individual response to the piece."

Watching spontaneous reactions to her work clearly brings Helen great delight. Her public art is enjoyed by people around the world, but she also makes private commissions.

"As long as I can keep the balance, I'm happy.

and commitment to planting and protecting native species.

"The tree is what you'll see when you walk in, and then that sets the scene for what else you might discover there," Helen explains.

"I really like this job – in these times of climate change and greater awareness of environmental issues, it's nice to be working on something like this."

Standing four-and-a-half metres tall, completing the tree hasn't been a quick process. "It's probably going to be a bit more than a year from beginning to end," she says, adding that over the winter months, she'll be making animals and birds to nestle in its branches.

She doesn't work on just one sculpture at a time. Currently, alongside her tree, she's got another commission to finish, and is looking ahead to an exhibition at Kilmorack Gallery in Beaulieu that will take her right back to her roots.

Having recently completed a playful peacock for Delilah's, a restaurant in Lochinver, using kitchen utensils such as graters and spoons, she's decided to do more of the same and let scrap metal provide her inspiration for a while.

"What I want to do next is just have some fun, and see where my scrap takes me... I think we all need a bit of joy right now, don't we?"

We most certainly do, and Helen's work – full of life, charm and wit – never fails to deliver that in spades.

*Visit the website below to see more of Helen's sculptures. Further information on Trees for Life's rewilding centre can be found at [treesforlife.org.uk/dundreggan](https://treesforlife.org.uk/dundreggan).*

[www.helendenerley.co.uk](https://www.helendenerley.co.uk)

