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# COUNTRY LIVING

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A large-scale wire sculpture of several birds in flight, arranged in a diagonal line from the top left to the bottom right. The birds are constructed from thin, dark metal wires, with some lighter-colored wires visible in the wings and tails. The background is a plain, light-colored surface.

# Flights of fancy

From curved-billed curlews to flocks of starlings soaring through the sky, Celia Smith creates avian art from lengths of scrap metal, twisting and shaping the wire to give each bird a sense of movement and character

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW MONTGOMERY  
WORDS BY RUTH CHANDLER



**S**urrounded by an arc of barnacle geese lit-up with a flash of spring sunlight, Celia Smith opens the leather case at her feet and untangles a mass of wire. Studying the handsome monochrome birds in front of her, she rapidly twists lengths of copper with nothing but a pair of pliers and her hands, capturing their shape in a basic frame, and directing her gaze from one to the other as each changes posture.



Soon, she in turn becomes the subject of an elderly couple's scrutiny, then a child scatters some feed and the geese dart off to peck at the grain, deserting Celia. "That comes with the territory," she says with a good-natured grin.

At Slimbridge Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust in Gloucestershire, she is in her element. The centre is home to the world's largest collection of swans, ducks and geese, providing the young bird sculptor with an endless source of subject matter. Though she occasionally draws with pencil, she usually cuts to the chase and delineates the lines of her subjects with wire. Back at her studio in Bath, she works up larger pieces, making a basic frame from chicken or fencing wire. "I fiddle with these for hours - it's essential to get them right," she says. She works over the frame using one length of wire,

avoiding the need to solder pieces together, wrapping it around the legs to create the right thickness, bending it to make the joints. Through sharp observation she captures the exact camber of a curlew's beak, spread of a mallard's foot and profile of a swan's head, while each twist glints in the light, suggesting movement, imbuing the sculptures with a sense of every bird's character.

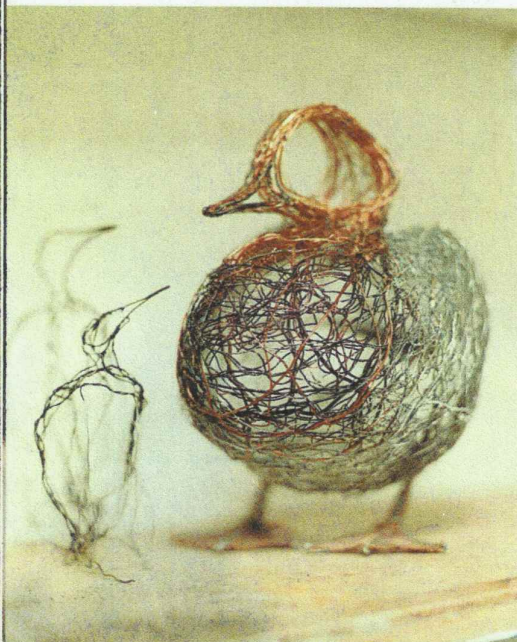
It was the assortment of chickens and a tangle of old fencing wire on her parents' dairy and arable farm in Gloucestershire that first inspired Celia to sculpt birds in this material. While living at home, having finished her degree in Fine Art Sculpture at London's Wimbledon School of Art in 1996 ("I was desperate to get back to the countryside, I'm not really a city person"), she approached a local gallery about a commission. Studying the hens in the farmyard, she produced four figures, each in a different medium: wire, twigs, cement and wool. The simple black wirework outline featuring a red comb was by far the most successful - and her obsession with the medium began. While she worked in bars and cafés, Celia crafted wirework chickens in a variety of designs and sizes over the next two years, selling them in shops and galleries.

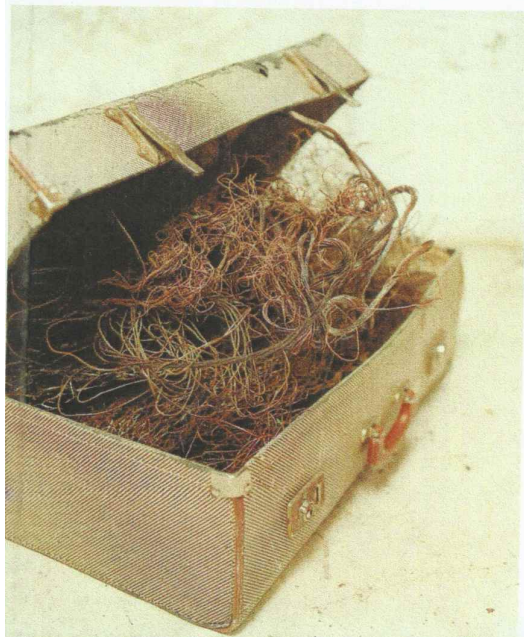
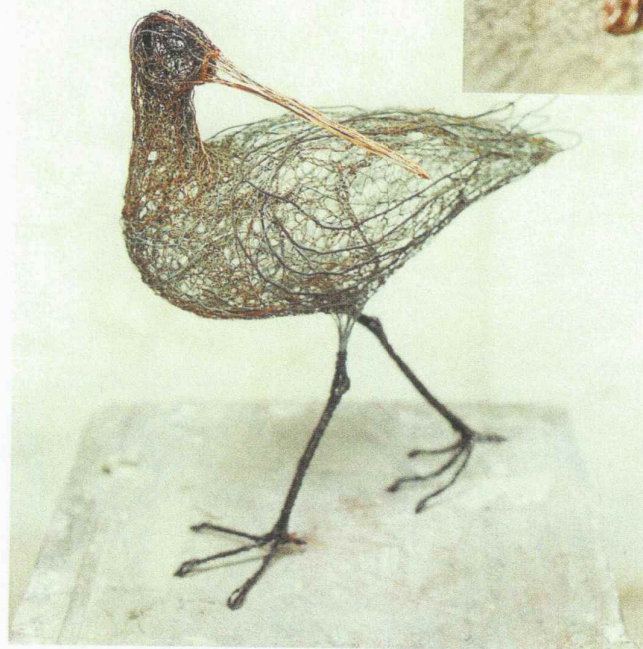
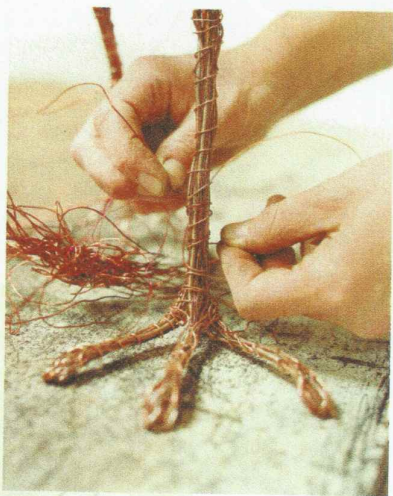
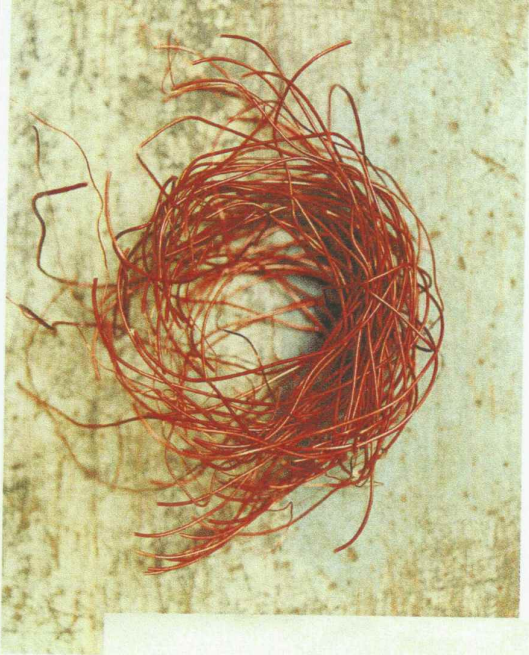
Shortly after the move to her pretty terraced cottage in Box in 1998, a village on the steep, hilly outskirts of Bath, she made an entire flock of hens for an exhibition - the publicity for which led to an inundation of orders, meaning that she could afford to take a part-time position at an arts marketing business and concentrate on crafting the increasingly popular birds. Her work was in such demand that halfway through a spell travelling the world with her now husband Peter in 2000, she returned to her parents' farm to carry out a large order of cockerels for the Portuguese restaurants Nando's. "I made 20 sculptures in four weeks - I was working round the clock," she recalls. Rejoining Peter in New Zealand, Celia began to study the country's rich birdlife, making the transition from sculptures of domestic poultry to wild birds.

On her return to the UK, she turned her attention to British wildfowl and, today, Celia is busily working on commissions and meeting orders for her covetable wirework sculptures - from tiny copper curlews to vast tangles of starlings in flight. She spends up to one day every week at Slimbridge: "I can be really close to the ▷



**TOP LEFT** A Nene goose. **TOP RIGHT** Finishing a 'sketch' in situ. **ABOVE** Celia spends at least one day a week studying birds outside. **LEFT** Pieces often contain different metals, which react with each other, helping the sculptures to evolve over time





**TOP LEFT** Friends of Celia's leave nests of wire on her doorstep. **TOP RIGHT** The birds are built up in layers. **ABOVE** A sculpture of a black-tailed godwit. **LEFT** Old cases are ideal for transporting her materials

birds there – they're so tame." She has recently bought a telescope which, set up on a tripod in a hide, allows her to watch a bird such as a heron in great detail while her hands are free to 'sketch' in wire – a mesmerising spectacle in itself. "Observing a bird in its natural environment is the best way to get an idea of its shape and behaviour," Celia explains. "So sculpting outside just seems natural."

In her search for new subject matter, she travels all over the

British Isles. In November 2005, she was granted a bursary by the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust and the Society of Wildlife Artists to study the whooper swans at Welney in Norfolk. "I went out to the fens to sketch them and set up my studio in one of the hides where I'd watch them at dusk." Shetland's puffins, razorbills and guillemots lured Celia to the islands where she lived from January to May 2006 as artist in residence at a primary school, introducing the children to her wirework methods and using her duck-egg blue VW Transporter van as a mobile studio-cum-hide so as not to scare her subjects away. It was here, where fences, not hedges, mark boundaries, that she gathered reams and reams of old, rusty wire. "There was tonnes – all the shades of orange, red and brown," she

says, her smile broadening as she recalls finding such treasure.

In her studio, metal strands of all thicknesses and colours, from powder-coated white to fiery brass, spill out from shelves of boxes. A reel of gauzy metal, in which she punches holes and sews washers, forms the polka-dot plumage of the guinea fowls that strut about her parents' farm, while black-and-white-patterned kettle flexes will become the plumage of barnacle geese. Celia finds much of her material at a scrapyards in nearby Yeovil. The recycling aspect of her craft is important to her, as issues of sustainability are close to her heart – even her wedding dress was wire-framed and made with recycled fabric. She can't resist stopping by a ditch to strip a dumped mattress of its springs ("A source of huge embarrassment to Peter," she says). BT provides her with sheaves of old paper-covered, rainbow-coloured telephone wires, for the vibrant feathers of peacocks and the comical feet of coots.

Surprisingly, it is through her craft that she developed an interest in birds, not the other way round. "If I don't know what the species is, I'll try and identify it from my sketches when I get back to the van. I've even started using twitching websites," she says, with an expression of disbelief at her own admission. "Each time I'm out in the field, I learn more about a bird's movement and I see some amazing events unfold" – such as witnessing a 'starling sky' one night at Slimbridge. She also becomes the subject of near theft at nesting time as birds take a shine to her lengths of twig-like wire.

Celia is so enthusiastic about birdlife, her artform and materials, it's hard to imagine her ever running out of ideas. "I'm into waders, such as godwits, at the moment; I like their ridiculously long legs and beaks," she says. "And I want to capture the black and white flicker of lapwings as they fly in the Somerset Levels," she says. She is also keen to explore further the chemistry of all these metals – applying heat, corroding them with water. "But what I'd like most of all," she says, "is to have my own flock of hens to sculpt." **Small studies start from £120. Celia Smith ([www.celia-smith.co.uk](http://www.celia-smith.co.uk)) will be exhibiting at The Lund Gallery in North Yorkshire (01347 824400; [www.lundgallery.co.uk](http://www.lundgallery.co.uk)) from 8 July to 31 August 2008. She is also teaching a wirework course at Shute Farm Studio in Somerset on 3-4 November 2008 (01749 880746; [www.shutefarmstudio.org.uk](http://www.shutefarmstudio.org.uk)).**