

FLIGHT OF FANCY

Everyone from Charles Saatchi to Hermès flocks to Kate MccGwire's floating studio for her sculptural alchemy – turning rubbish into art

By Tara LOADER WILKINSON Photographs by Tereza CERVENOVA



It's a frosty, sunny winter morning and the artist Kate MccGwire is ushering me into her studio. But this is no ordinary studio. MccGwire works aboard a houseboat moored at her island home just off the Thames in Weybridge, Surrey.

MccGwire, 58, is best known for her feathered sculptures, which coil, flow, writhe and undulate as if alive. She started working with feathers and other discarded natural materials after graduating from London's Royal College of Art as a mature student in 2004. One piece from her graduation show used 23,000 boiled chicken wishbones, from catering suppliers, arranged in a continuous spiral. The sculpture measured five by seven metres, and the advertising tycoon and art collector Charles Saatchi snapped it up on sight. Three days later she was installing it at the Saatchi Gallery. 'It took me six months to collect and clean all the wishbones and a month to assemble,' she recalls. 'I was very proud of the final piece but I had no expectation for its future and had thought that it would end up stored in boxes under my bed.'

After that flying start, there was no stopping MccGwire. Her works, which can take years to complete, cost between £3,000 and £100,000. One six-metre pigeon-feather sculpture will be installed in the bar of the soon-to-open I Hotel Mayfair, London. Another was commissioned by whisky brand Royal Salute and unveiled during last year's Frieze London art fair in October at a lavish party at Tate Britain. Further works are displayed at the Hôtel de Crillon in Paris and the NoMad hotel in Las Vegas. Her pieces have appeared in exhibitions all over the world including in Japan, China, South

Korea, Germany, America, Switzerland, Canada and Hong Kong. There is currently an eight month waiting list for commissions, which she fits in around exhibitions deadlines: 'It's quite a juggle.' The Paris-based fashion designer Julie de Libran has been a vocal supporter, having collected MccGwire's work for more than a decade, and has two of her works hanging currently above her bed. But MccGwire guards the identity of her other private collectors closely, although she will say, 'They have been incredibly supportive over the years and they are very high level.'

The interior of her floating studio is a bright, feathery nest: the shelves are neatly stacked with boxes labelled MALLARD, PIGEON, PHEASANT, GOOSE and MAGPIE, her three assistants are engrossed in sorting feathers according to shape, colour, pattern and size. One prepares a row of tawny mottled pheasant neck feathers, another attaches a line of iridescent blue magpie wing feathers to archival tape ready for their second life as pieces within a masterful jigsaw puzzle.

On the table sits a white 'S' sculpture, tightly knotted into itself, waiting for MccGwire to add the final few snowy goose feathers. Except for the sounds of snipping and sticking, the studio is quiet; postcards, potted plants, half-drunk cups of tea are dotted around. MccGwire's swimsuit is drying over a radiator. Every morning she dips into the leafy waterway to swim alongside herons, cormorants and a family of kingfishers, partly for the endorphin rush, partly 'to keep dementia at bay'.

'Have a go,' she says, handing me a pair of scissors and

'We have a fixed view of what is beautiful. I want to turn that on its head by showing you something mesmerising made out of vermin'

a racing-pigeon feather to prepare, its fibres still printed with the telephone number of its owner. MccGwire uses feathers only from British birds that have moulted, or else have been culled by farmers or shot on game drives. She is sent Jiffy bags stuffed with them by friendly pigeon fanciers when their birds shed their feathers in April and October. The owners of pheasant shoots send her feathers after plucking. The magpie plumes come from farms after the spring cull. 'I find feathers miraculous,' she says. 'They are so thin and yet so strong, with a gradated colour that's beautiful. They're almost weightless yet support flight and warmth. We can go to the moon but we still have not been able to manufacture a feather.'

Under her gaze I snip off the fluffy lower bit and thin the shiny quill to make it more pliable, then trim the feather into a scallop shape. As the blades cut into the filaments, there's a metallic clicking noise. Eventually, I

hand her my trimmed feather. 'Thanks... we need about another 2,500 of those for each piece,' she says, laughing.

Born in Wroxham on the Norfolk Broads, MccGwire grew up at a boatyard with her mother, a primary school teacher, and her father, the managing director of a boating holiday company. 'We had water all around us and were surrounded by people making things,' she recalls. 'Those two things seemed quite natural to me.' She started her working life as an interior architect ('I was never terribly happy in that role') before enrolling in art school. After graduation, she bought a 120-year-old Dutch barge, which she moored on Platt's Eyot, a semi-derelict island on the Thames at Hampton. 'There were all sorts of craftsmen and women who worked on the island – musicians, wood carvers...' One day, walking past a dilapidated warehouse, she noticed the floor was covered in pigeon feathers. 'They were from relatively clean, country birds. I picked them up and realised I wanted to make something.'

She uses the barge – named Barton B – as her studio, and as a peripatetic home. On Barton B, she embarked on a two-year trip around European waterways with her Italian partner, Carlo, a retired engineer who is now a technician in her studio, making work en route, which was then shown at La Galerie Particulière in Paris. They were joined by her two children from a previous relationship, Jake and Tom, now aged 29 and 27, who work in sports and technology. (Her former husband also gave her his unusual surname, which has its roots in Enniskillen, County Fermanagh.)

MccGwire's work questions society's definition of



FROM LEFT Kate MccGwire working with sorted feathers in her studio, and (above) finishing a pheasant-feather piece



beauty, some of her pieces using human hair. 'It's interesting,' she says, 'hair on your head, eyelashes – beautiful; hair in the plughole, hair under your arms – repulsive. It doesn't make sense that you choose one hair to be beautiful, another not.' And, not surprisingly, water also inspires her. She gestures to the river outside. 'These ever-changing patterns; I am always trying to capture that image. I made some pieces recently with magpie feathers, looking at the ebb and flow of the water, to try to capture its moods.' She showed them at the Galerie Les Filles du Calvaire, in the Marais, Paris. 'We discovered a very beautiful piece by Kate at the Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature,' says Charlotte Boudon, director of Les Filles du Calvaire. 'We find in her chimerical sculptures a beauty that hypnotises, and raises different emotions. It is pure magic.'

The end results of MccGwire's labours are undeniably attractive, but key to their success is that she takes something other people see as worthless and makes it precious. 'I am trying to get people to look again at what they think they know,' she says. 'Many people don't know that the dove, the symbol of peace, and pigeons, which people consider "flying rats", are the same bird. Doves are the albino version. We have a fairly fixed view of what we regard as noteworthy or beautiful. I want to turn that on its head by showing you something mesmerising and beautiful made out of birds that are thought of as vermin.'

Her uncanny sculptures are bought by some of the

world's most respected collectors and have been exhibited at the Museum of Arts and Design (New York), the Royal Academy of Arts (London) and recently at the Chiostro del Bramante (Rome). Fashion powerhouses including Helmut Lang and Hermès flock to her, and the Antwerp designer Ann Demeulemeester sent MccGwire's quills bristling in kid leather down the Paris runway as neck pieces in 2016. Her work has now been selected for a touring exhibition with hi-tech Dutch fashion designer Iris van Herpen. Separately, MccGwire plans a line of limited-edition silk and cashmere scarves of her own.

The artist shows no signs of slowing down. 'I want to learn 60 skills before I'm 60, which I can feed back into my work,' she says. These include pottery, weaving, silversmithing, wildlife photography and working with copper. Lately she taught herself kintsugi, the Japanese art of piecing broken pottery back together with lacquer and gold dust, conceived out of the philosophy that by embracing imperfection one might make a more beautiful object. Of course, rather than pottery, she used swan's eggshells from a nearby nest that was raided by a fox.

As I prepare to take my leave, MccGwire spots something out of the window of the barge. 'Quick, the kingfisher!' she whispers, stepping outside with her binoculars to get a closer look at the flash of teal in the undergrowth. Will she ever grow bored with being on the water surrounded by feathered friends, I wonder?

She shakes her head. 'Never.' ●