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THE THING WITH *feathers*

Artist Rebecca Jewell's childhood among animals and birds has led to a strong affinity with feathers that flutter through her mixed media artworks

I'VE ALWAYS LOVED animals and nature - my parents were both zoologists, and when I was five we lived in Nigeria and had a pet chimp called Juma, and a mini zoo, where my mother reared orphaned baby animals. My parents took me on field trips, and bird-watching, and back in Highgate, where I grew up, every year my father would show us the newly-hatched blue-tits inside the nest box in the garden. My mother worked at the Natural History Museum and my sisters and I would regularly visit her in the 'bone room' which was full of rows and rows of enormous elephant tusks and mammal skeletons.

When I was 18 I went to live in

Papua New Guinea for a year, with an anthropologist and his wife and children - we lived in the Western Highlands with the Gamugai people, deep in the cloud-topped mountains and thick rainforest which was home to many species of parrots and birds of paradise. This was a defining time in my life. The experience of seeing these amazing birds, both in the wild and adorning the heads and bodies of the men and women, has had a huge influence on my life and career. I went to Cambridge to study anthropology and then to the Royal College of Art to do a PhD in 'feather art.'

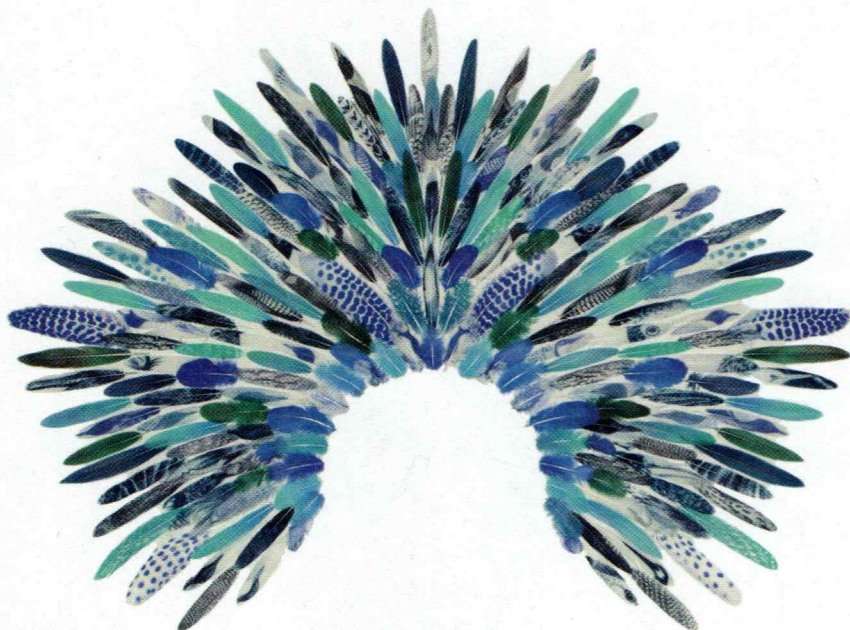
And now that's what I do; I am a print-maker and collage-artist, working in the

Chocolate Factory in Haringey. When I am working towards a show, my studio is hard to move about in, with every surface spilling over with bags of feathers, tubes of inks, bottles of glue, antique glass domes, cabinets of eggs and printed feathers, bundles of willow sticks and rolls of netting. My work has become increasingly mixed media. Central to my work is my Hunter Penrose etching press, and, of course, feathers.

Process is as important to me as product. Having perfected a way of printing directly onto feathers, I like to 'construct' images through the collecting of feathers, preparing the plate, inking-up, printing and then



Images of 19th century bird illustrations are printed onto feathers



“At 18 I spent a year in Papua New Guinea which had a huge influence on my life and career”

arranging and collaging the feathers into ‘headdresses and artefacts’. In Papua New Guinea, Highlanders wear bird-of-paradise feathers to acquire the birds’ beauty. Likewise, the wearer of my Owl Headdress might acquire the wisdom and majesty of the printed owls.

Most of my images are from 19th century bird illustrations, transferred to feathers using my etching press. The feather acts as a print surface, accepting ink and surviving the press’s pressure; the picture emerges with the quality of an historical engraving, the barbs on the feather’s vane imitating lines made by a roulette tool. Single, delicate feathers framed as isolated images represent the precarious status of many species.

In the last few years I have made work about the illegal hunting and trapping of birds, and about the collecting of specimens and artefacts for museums. I use either my own original drawings or photographs, or images from books. I must then find the right feather for the image; it has to curve in the right direction and be the correct width and shape. Sometimes it must be steamed and ‘preened’ first, so that the feather is smooth and neat.

I use moulted feathers from many different sources: my own doves, feathers from bird parks and zoos, and after meeting the swan herd at Windsor I get beautiful, long, white, moulted feathers from the rescued swans at the sanctuary. I also buy goose, turkey and duck feathers from suppliers to the millinery trade.

I must now have printed hundreds and hundreds of feathers, but every time I lift one off the plate, I still hold my breath in anticipation. The excitement never goes away; it is addictive. Quite often half a day goes by with failures, but as the ink warms up and the colours are just right and the pressure on the press is perfect, then towards the end of the day things start to go well, and I am on a roll.

I want each feather to tell its own story. Assembled and collaged together, either into headdresses or capes or onto enlarged photographs, or sewn onto hanging ‘mist nets’ - the final artworks aim to have a narrative of history, collecting, voyages and entrapment.

Rebecca Jewell is exhibiting works at the Catto Gallery, 100 Heath Street, London NW3 1DP, on February 7-25
cattogallery.co.uk