



**THIS PAGE** Melanie's sculpture 'And Then I Saw a Deer' sits on a shelf in her studio in Birmingham. Deer symbolise fertility, an important theme in her work

**FACING PAGE** Piles of illustrations, the first stage of her working process, lie on a workbench surrounded by inspirational objects such as decorated eggs from Romania, butterflies and bird feathers collected on country walks

# ANIMAL MAGIC

*Metalsmith Melanie Tomlinson's jewel-coloured creatures and mechanical devices are imbued with stories from folklore and the natural world*

FEATURE **CLARE GOGERTY**  
PHOTOGRAPHS **ANDREW MONTGOMERY**





1 A praxinoscope – a Victorian mechanical device that was the forerunner to the zoetrope – created for the Great Crane Project. The revolving drum sits on top of a cabinet filled with fish, representing the wetland habitat of the wading birds

2 Melanie paints images for her 3D work with gouache before transferring the illustrations on to metal via a printing process

3 Melanie adjusts the praxinoscope. In the centre is a mirrored column that reflects images of cranes in flight and appears to make them move. She found the glass base in a junk shop and customised it

4 Cranes fly through a forest in Brandenburg in the base of a zoetrope. Melanie's work for the Great Crane Project celebrates the reintroduction of cranes into the Somerset Levels from Germany

5 Butterfly and moth brooches on one of Melanie's collection of metal trays. She sells the brooches through the British Museum and on her website

6 Her studio is packed with references to the natural world

*'I like how metal is difficult to bend and shape. Working with it is a challenge: it can buckle easily but it's very satisfying when it works out'*

Enter Melanie Tomlinson's studio and you'll find yourself in a glittering world of magic, myth and fable. Strange metallic contraptions spin, sparking light and offering glimpses of winged creatures in flight. A copper-coloured fox prowls atop a jewel-like box, its fur hopping with butterflies. A figure of a young girl strokes the ears of a tiger as another in elaborate costume sits and collects autumn leaves.

Melanie creates these metal sculptures, dioramas, zoetropes and praxinoscopes (more on these later) from a cabin at the bottom of her garden on the outskirts of Birmingham. A suburban cul-de-sac is an unlikely place to find work rooted in nature and informed by fairy tales but the city is where Melanie has always lived.

'Growing up here meant that visiting the countryside felt like travelling to another world,' she says. 'It had a magical feeling to it. These days, I like the balance between living in the city and country, which is only a couple of miles away.' A love of the natural world, and of the animals within it, runs through her work. 'I'm concerned about the destruction of habitats,' she says. 'I'm also interested in how animals are portrayed in folklore. They have been done a disservice.'

She points to a shelf crammed with images, many on tins, from the story of *Little Red Riding Hood*. The wolf does not come out well in any of them. 'I've got a thing about that tale,' she says, 'and I absolutely love wolves. How we learn about animals as children affects the way we view them as adults. In Native American stories, animals are seen as teachers. Unlike here, they are seen as wise, not dangerous. They are revered.'

A journey to Romania last year (her husband's homeland) brought her into close proximity with its wolves. The country is close to her heart for many reasons. 'There is so much wilderness there, and I love its decorated eggs, costumes, folk art and people,' she says.

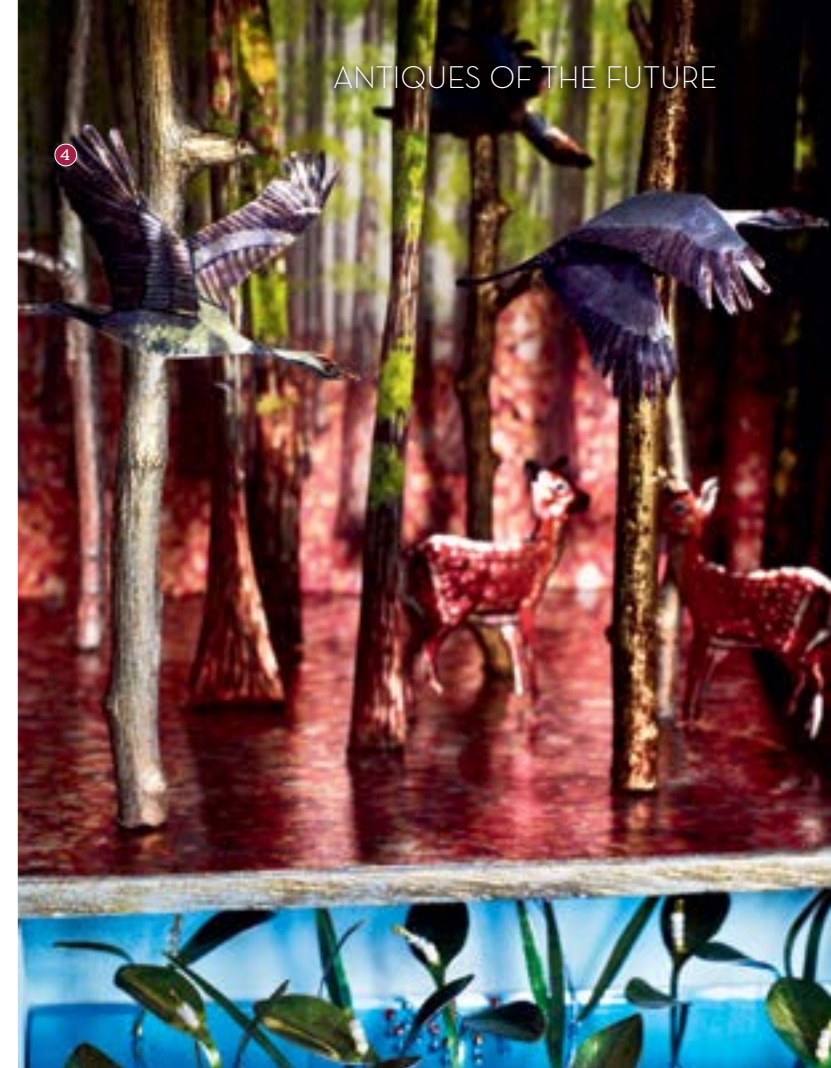
Melanie's artistic journey began when she studied graphic design and illustration at Birmingham Polytechnic. 'Those were the days before Apple Macs,' she says, 'so I learnt techniques such as hand-lettering in gouache that have been very useful.' Each of her pieces starts with a gouache drawing, several of which are spread across a surface in her studio: they are all brightly coloured, skilfully drawn, fascinating in their detail.

Melanie transfers these illustrations using a specialist photographic printer on to sheets of tinned steel. All her work, except for her brooches, which are photo-etched, are hand-cut. 'I've taught myself how to work in metal through a lot of trial and error,' she says.

#### WORKING WITH METAL

Her love affair with the material began in childhood when her fascination for old tins, especially biscuit tins, began. It continued at college, where she cut up recycled tins to make assemblages. 'After a while, I wanted to print my own metal,' she says. 'I like how it catches the light and how the colour shines through when it's printed, and I like how it is difficult to bend and shape. Working with metal is always a challenge: it can buckle easily but it's very satisfying when it works out.'

She produces a wing-shaped box that, around its edge, tells the story of a girl feeding a pigeon, an idea inspired by marginalia of medieval manuscripts. ➤





7 The Kakawahie birds of Hawaii – featured on this diorama created for the exhibition ‘Ghost of Gone Birds’ – have been extinct since the 1960s

8 A moth brooch gets a few finishing touches on Melanie’s work bench

9 Printed metal strips are cut to form the sides of a box. Melanie regards these illustrations as akin to the marginalia found in medieval manuscripts

10 ‘Some people find this sculpture sorrowful,’ says Melanie of ‘Angharad October’. ‘But I see her as a girl who loves autumn, searching among the leaves’

11 The Rodrigues starlings featured on this diorama have been extinct for centuries. They once inhabited Rodrigues island in the Indian Ocean

12 A representation of a Madonna and Child, picked up in Romania, sits on one of Melanie’s illustrations for the box in ‘Angharad October’



## COLLECTING MELANIE TOMLINSON

ANDY HORN, EXHIBITIONS MANAGER, BIRMINGHAM MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY

‘Melanie’s work has an illustrative quality and often incorporates movement – for example her early automata and recent pieces inspired by Victorian zoetropes. Her love of nature is reflected in her beautifully observed drawings and forms. She brings a fresh brightness to her work through the use of colour and her training as an illustrator. Antiques provide pleasure through their style, forms, colours and craftsmanship. Melanie’s work does all of this, as well as reminding us of our connections to the natural world.’

The pigeon pecks at grain on its top. ‘I wanted to make a complex shape,’ she explains. ‘It was very difficult.’

Last year, Melanie created a further challenge for herself with the introduction of two almost-forgotten Victorian devices into her work: the zoetrope and the praxinoscope. These spinning black cylinders had regular slots through which the viewer watched a strip of images become a moving sequence – an early form of animation.

The impetus to use them followed a commission by Somerset Art Works to record the activities of the Great Crane Project, which is reintroducing cranes into the Somerset Levels. ‘The machines are great vehicles to tell the story of the cranes,’ says Melanie, who followed the birds’ journey from the collection of eggs in Germany, to incubation at Slimbridge Wildfowl Trust, to release on the Levels. ‘Cranes have been extinct in the UK for about 400 years, so I wasn’t really aware of them, but the more I found out about them, the more fascinating they became.’

### THE COMPANY OF CRANES

Melanie’s own versions of zoetropes and praxinoscopes (which have a mirrored centre) are called *The Company of Cranes* – the name was inspired by Angela Carter’s short story (which was adapted into a film) *The Company of Wolves*. The revolving drums sit on cabinets inside of which 3D elements tell parts of the story: shimmering fish from the wetlands of Somerset, a blossoming tree, the reed beds where cranes nest. The drums are printed with further scenes and their edges are fringed with photo-etched lettering – ‘A crane did fly by. It was so very beautiful’ – birds and vegetation. Spin the drum and

the cranes appear to take flight. They have the rare, jewel-like quality of medieval reliquaries.

Now that the crane project is complete, what does she plan to do next? ‘I’d like to make more pieces based on the cranes and build up a body of work,’ she says. ‘Perhaps I’ll have an exhibition in Germany, and I am also designing lettering based around crane motifs.’

She also hopes to be involved in more participatory projects – last year she oversaw a craft project with newly arrived women in Birmingham. ‘We explored the idea of growth and hope using seed and flower forms,’ she says. ‘The aim was to make the women feel part of the community.’ Meanwhile, she continues to make her popular moth, butterfly and bird brooches and to develop her intriguing sculptural work. ‘I like the idea of hidden elements,’ she says. ‘Concealed compartments, secret messages... That’s something I’d like to explore more.’

As we leave the studio and its drawers of glittering moths, shelves populated with gentle creatures and walls hanging with Romanian costumes, Melanie gives me a brooch wrapped in paper stamped with her logo. The logo is a representation of herself, Madonna-and-child-like, with her arms wrapped protectively around a crow. ‘I wanted to show how precious crows are,’ she says. Rather like her work itself. ■

You can see Melanie’s latest work – *Snow Leopard* – in the New Walk Gallery, 53 New Walk, Leicester (0116 225 4900; [bit.ly/cGqVFU](http://bit.ly/cGqVFU)). Her butterfly and bird brooches are on sale at the British Museum ([britishmuseum.org](http://britishmuseum.org)). For commissions and sales, visit [melanietomlinson.co.uk](http://melanietomlinson.co.uk)

