

All Creatures Great and Small

FROM OLD VEHICLE PARTS, RETIRED HEADLIGHTS AND WORN CUTLERY, THESE INTRICATE SCULPTURES SLOWLY EMERGE AND COME TO LIFE IN THE HANDS OF FRENCH ARTIST EDOUARD MARTINET

WORDS AND STYLING **NAOMI JONES**, IMAGES © **BRENT DARBY**

There's almost complete silence in the dark, dingy workshop, where a man is crouched on his haunches peering through the gloom at the dusty floor. Before him lay old rusted spoons, nuts, bolts and worn metal arches that once adorned a gentleman's push bike. He picks up a spoon with grubby, yet elegant, fingers and carefully scrutinizes it; once it has passed his strict inspection he stands and turns to the vice where the tarnished utensil is placed within its grip and has its neck sawn off.

The man with a firm hand on the saw is Edouard Martinet, a 53-year-old French sculptor based in Rennes, the capital

of Brittany, who turns unwanted junk into incredibly sophisticated, larger than life creatures which include all manner of insect forms, fish and birds. They're so exquisite they would never give away the place of their birth, so to witness one emerging from the scraps of metal in the old barn is a rather special experience. Sylvie, Edouard's wife of 18 years, is his closest companion, yet even she is unable to fully understand how these metallic beauties are taken from one man's imagination to exist in tangible form. 'I think perhaps if we could even get close to understanding how Edouard does this, then we would all be artists,' she whispers so as not to disturb her husband's process. 'It is a rare human being who can have such ideas in the midst of chaos, it is perhaps only a true artist. But Edouard never stops thinking about his work, it is on his mind from the moment he wakes up, very early in the morning, till the second he falls asleep, which can be two or three o'clock in the morning; holidays, weekends, he never switches off.'

The Dragonfly, its eyes made from lorry rear lights, abdomen was once a bike pump and wings are wire netting from a hen coop.



(above) Edouard in his workshop and (right) insect studies that help inspire his work. (opposite page) The Spider, its abdomen is made from engine parts and the web created from plumbing chain.

The idea is perhaps a simple one, using second-hand objects found at antique markets, car boot sales, and even in skips, and recycling them into something with more aesthetic and monetary value. But the distinct personalities that Edouard is able to inject into his pieces laugh at their humble, cast-off origins, as though what he's doing is an impossible act of wonder. Others agree – these sculptures have quite an impressive following, including *Sherlock Holmes* and *The Matrix* producer Joel Silver, lead singer and guitarist of *Police* *Dog* Hogan James Studholme, along with car and motorbike enthusiasts and discerning art collectors all over the world. Martinet's fans need wallets less dusty than his workshop floor, however, as his pieces command princely sums in the thousands.

But money isn't Edouard's driving force: 'I turned my back on a successful graphic design career in Paris around 25 years ago,' he explains in a quiet French whisper (with Sylvie translating, also whispering) while taking a brief break from the time-consuming construction. 'I had grown fed up of the cut-throat advertising and publicity industry. I wanted to return to my boyhood passion of hands-on making, to regain the love of crafting objects from just bits and pieces, that had kept me out of trouble during my adolescence.' To make the switch from fast-paced city life to a new, calmer

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direction he spent a couple of years in Charente clearing his mind and assembling new ideas. Then in 1996 he returned to his home town, taking on a part-time teaching role at LISAA (L'Institut Supérieur des Arts Appliqués) which enabled him to spend more time on his art. Edouard has called himself a sculptor since then.

Long days in the old barn just outside the city, very little sleep, and hours spent driving from skip to skip, brocante to brocante, scouring for just the right pieces, Martinet is not a man who can delegate. 'I did have an assistant, at one point,' he says, 'but she could not understand my methods. When she left, I never replaced her.' These days, with just a little help from Sylvie, a French and English teacher, who helps with some administration and translation, he controls ♦♦



The Longicorn Beetle, its abdomen is made from two Citroen Traction boot handles, the eyes are bike reflectors and its head a champagne cork remover.

Edouard's top three brocantes

Place Viarmes
in Nantes is his favourite, a flea market with over 100 stalls, held every Saturday.

Rennes
every Thursday morning at La Halle Martenot.

The autojumble
Reims in the Champagne area in the north-east of France, one of the biggest markets for car and bike parts in Europe.



the whole flow. Edouard never asks anyone to pick up his ingredients, some market-stall holders may put things aside for him, but he always has to see them for himself before committing; the objects he chooses have to have just the right form, lines or curves to fit in with one of the dozens of his works in progress, all of which he tracks in his mind using his innate skills for graphic design. Sylvie says: 'Edouard loves to use old items because they have a story. They have been patinated by time and their use or handling. They've had a life of their own and he gives them a new, different, life again. His favourite type of salvage is bike and motorbike parts (these items are interesting as far as the shapes and the mechanisms are concerned); he normally uses the bike brakes to serve as insect legs, and chain guards for bird feathers or grasshopper wings. He also loves vintage car lights (one of which became the abdomen for a praying mantis), and kitchen utensils – spoons for fish bones or spatulas for their tails.' Many parts of the production, such as the monotonous winding on of nuts, bolts and spoons to create the spine of a fish would be done by an apprentice, if Edouard were not the artist in question.



(clockwise from left) Rhinoceros Beetle, Dragonfly, Red Ant and Edouard choosing pieces at the brocante.

He does every bit himself, and without the use of solder. 'It is a little boring, this part,' he admits as he resumes his task on the workshop floor, 'but I let my mind wander to the next step or even to another sculpture.'

He is the ultimate multi-tasker and, as such, Edouard's work is at several different stages, from boxes of metal treasure gathered ready to be assembled, to half finished forms. On average, if all the components were available in his workshop, he could complete a sculpture in one month, but that is rarely the case, so many take several months or even years to finish as must have just the right parts. ➡



The many parts and components, collected over years, that Edouard hand-picks for his pieces.

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He’ll never ‘make do’ or force a fit. The first Dragonfly, for example, took 15 years to complete. Indeed, during this time, the components are altered as little as possible from the moment he procures them: if they are rusted, they will not be polished; if shiny, they’re not aged. ‘Everything plays its part in the finished piece,’ Edouard explains. ‘I only drill, cut or bend to help them join together.’

Despite his eagerness to let the components remain as original as possible, he does manage to produce incredibly life-like creatures. Entomologists and vets who’ve seen Edouard’s sculptures all seem to agree that as far as anatomy goes, they look pretty accurate, a skill of his imagination that is assisted only by a few reference books kept at home in his apartment in central Rennes. ‘Of course, when looking at a real fish you don’t see the spine,’ he admits, ‘but I think my sculpture is clearly identifiable as a fish, and one that is alive, not cooked and cut up ready for the dining table.’

Although Edouard feels intensely connected to his sculptures, having brought them to life and nurtured them over months or years, he has no problem letting them go. The latest ensemble is being packaged up and sent to London for his exhibition at Sladmore Contemporary. Gerry Farrell, co-owner of the gallery, says: ‘Edouard’s work is brilliant and original, year after year people come from all over the world to see and buy it.’ But Edouard does keep hold of just one special piece – a sweet little ladybird that he made the year of his daughter Josephine’s birth 16 years ago. ‘We will never part with this one,’ says Edouard, ‘it holds memories far too special to let it go.’

» Edouard’s work will be at London Art Fair, Islington Design Centre, 17th –20th January 2017, londonartfair.co.uk and Sladmore Contemporary in April and May 2017, dates TBC. Tel: 020 7499 0365 or visit sladmorecontemporary.com