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Birds of a - found - feather

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Everybody has junk they want to get rid of - old combs or used biros - but one artist cannot get enough of it, writes Jennie Curtin.

Artists' studios are notoriously messy places, mucked about with paint or plaster, lined with half-drawn images or partly-framed masterpieces.

But Jane Gillings's studio is rather like a rainbow, stacked with colour-sorted containers of plastic cutlery, drawers of chess pieces, bundles of drinking straws, deodorant bottle lids, packing strap, old combs, used toothbrushes, empty biros: all the tools of trade of an artist who works only with used objects.

"I just can't throw anything away," she says, almost apologetically looking around at the crates of red bits or green bits, the drawers of orange, of purple, of blue and pink. Instead, she recycles, turning someone else's junk into works of art, mostly, in her current phase, magnificent birds.

They are dotted around the room, bright and colourful and remarkably like a conventional piece of sculpture. It's only on closer inspection that you see the cockatoo's wings are white plastic knives, the welcome swallow's breast is the curve of a plastic spoon, the heron gets its body from a two-litre milk bottle, its face from an old spray can pump and a beak from part of a coathanger and a pen.

Gillings is most certainly not a part of the throwaway society. She wants to find a use for everything rather than seeing it dumped in landfill.

"It's not actually about wanting to make a sculpture. It's more about using a resource. So I've got a box of corks - what am I going to do with it?"

Indeed, and what to do with old bread ties, Christmas cracker toys, cigarette lighters, countless lids and even a box of silicon sachets?

Gillings's collecting obsession began at an early age. "My mum said I used to go into the garden and find sticks and make things."

There are hints that it is an inherited trait. She remembers her dentist father excitedly coming home one day with an old-fashioned cash register, another day a box of metal fire helmets.

"And every Sunday with my brothers we used to scour the tip. That was in the days when you took your own stuff to the tip. It doesn't happen any more because it's all compacted when it's picked up so anything of any value gets ruined as it's being collected."

Gillings's sources are many and varied. Often friends give her their old stuff and some pieces she finds during council clean-ups. Her supply of rolls of old vinyl came from a nearby manufacturer who makes letters for sign writers.

"Initially I used to sneak there on the weekends and go through their bins," she says. When she eventually tired of that, she took over a regent bowerbird and confessed that she had raided their rubbish for her creations. The next day, they gave her a huge bin full of their leftovers.

Gillings has a degree in Chinese language and also trained as a dental technician at her parents' suggestion - "so I'd have something to fall back on". There she learnt about making casts and wax models and the properties of various materials, a variety of "weird skills", she says. Weird enough to get her a job at the Australian Museum, where her abilities were put to use setting up interactive displays, building fibreglass stands, dismantling exhibits and dabbling in taxidermy. She also worked for a time making architectural models, which was "really tedious work" but was good practice for the finicky feather-by-feather construction of her birds.

Gillings shares her talents with young people, working with Creative Youth Initiatives, a program run by Mission Australia to teach disadvantaged youth painting, craft, design and music. She also gives workshops in schools, where the kids love learning to mould plastic with a heat gun and to assemble pieces with hot glue.

The glue, wire and cable ties are the only equipment Gillings will buy for her art, although she does scan op shops. "That's the rules - it's got to be second-hand."

Found feathered friends at NG Art Gallery, 3 Little Queen Street, Chippendale until December 6, Tuesday to Saturday 11am-10pm.

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