



Part of a series on non-native plants titled 'Aliens', Annette's common rhododendron was based on a specimen collected in 1992, now held in the Welsh National Herbarium

Waxing botanical

More life-like than the new statue of Sir David Attenborough at Madame Tussaud's, **Annette Marie Townsend's** remarkable botanical wax sculptures have powerful tales to tell

Words: Margaret Bartlett Photos: Dave Caudery

Intricate, exquisite and astonishingly life-like, Annette Marie Townsend's botanical wax sculptures are almost shocking in their realism. But these painstakingly rendered, delicate works of art are not just pretty things; each twist of a root and blush of colour on a petal has a deeper story to tell about our relationship with the natural world.

This Cardiff-based natural history artist's real passion is to communicate powerful tales of scientific discovery through her remarkable waxworks. Annette's 2022 series 'Aliens', brought historic collections of non-native plants into vivid 3D colour, while the all-white and ghost-like 'Flight of the Bumblebees', is a reminder of the loss of our pollinator species. "I don't want to make things just for the sake of making them – I want them to have a purpose and a value," she explains. "I want the work to communicate what I feel is important and to elevate the scientific research being done, and talk about it with different audiences that might not see it otherwise.

"Findings are published in academic papers, but if you can publicise all those things to a wider audience, it raises awareness and helps people understand the cool science that's going on, as well as the things that are important to change about the way we live so we can make positive change for the future."



ABOVE Annette gained a love of natural history as well as highly prized waxworking skills while working at National Museum Wales

Annette's childhood love of art led to a degree in textile design. After graduating in 1995, she knocked on the door of Amgueddfa Cymru National Museum Wales in her home town of Cardiff, to ask if they had need of a botanical illustrator. "They said yeah, great. And they said 'can you draw dinosaurs?' I said, I'll give anything a go!" She went on to create dioramas and three-dimensional models, then was tasked with repairing the museum's important collection of over 1,000 wax sculptures.

Botanical wax sculptures were hugely popular in Victorian times – part of that era's fascination with cataloguing the natural world – but these natural history waxworking techniques and skills have now largely been lost. "From the notes of the artists who had worked there in the past, we learnt how to put those puzzle pieces together and how to repair and conserve them, to protect them for the future," explains Annette. She found wax a fascinating medium, and through years of patient study – as well as trial and error – honed her waxwork skills working on a variety of projects, including conserving models for Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

FROM DRAWING TO DIORAMAS

Annette also qualified as a natural science conservator while at the museum. "I used to help look after all the natural sciences collections. On a Monday when the museum was shut, I'd be in the dioramas hoovering the badgers or grooming the fur on the woolly mammoths. I'd be working on displays in the galleries, new exhibitions, conserving things in the stores; it was really wide, really interesting work. I loved my job."

But after 20 years at the museum, it was time for a new chapter. "I was doing a job that was amazing, but I felt like I wasn't using my whole range of skills. I remember one point where I was sat in the basement looking down



LEFT Tools of the trade sit tidily in old jam jars in Annette's light-filled garden studio
BELOW LEFT 'Primrose, *Primula vulgaris*' is one of seven in Annette's series 'Life Support'; each flower represents a month in lockdown

“My sculptures remind you of the fragility of the world around us”

a microscope sticking the legs back on a spider with reversible glue. I thought, I just need to go do something else.”

STORYTELLING THROUGH ART

Annette's light-filled studio is surrounded by bee-friendly flowers and has an air of quiet serenity. Books on botany fill the shelves and delicate pencil drawings for future projects are taped to the walls; a glass dome covers a diorama of fly agaric mushrooms bursting from fecund soil and surrounded by decaying leaves.

A perfect delicate yellow primrose sits solitary on a metal plinth within its own hand-blown glass orb, its roots all

a tangle. 'Primrose, *Primula vulgaris*' is one in a series of seven wildflower sculptures titled 'Life Support', created in 2020-2021 as Annette's response to the Covid pandemic. Inspired by daily walks in her local park during lockdown, when she found solace in observing the blooms as they appeared throughout that terrible spring and summer. Each is incredibly beautiful, yet isolated within its glass bubble - kept apart, as we all were in lockdown. Underneath, twisted roots and curling leaves convey an underlying unease and anxiety.

I remark on the most perfect apple, rosy and glowing on a plinth. Titled

'Paradise Lost', the model is the result of a collaboration with scientists at Cornell University in the USA who are working with farmers to study the effects of pesticide use on insect life. Annette made the apple from beeswax taken from hives in a single orchard; when analysed, the wax contained residues from 24 different pesticides. "The farmer changed his practice due to the analysis," she explains. "He stopped using particular chemicals, because the amounts they were finding were above the lethal dose limits." Annette is hoping to begin a similar project in the UK, drawing on the work of scientists at Royal Holloway, University of London.

"My sculptures have hidden, darker narratives woven through them," she adds. "They remind you of the delicacy and fragility of the world, which we should do our best to protect."

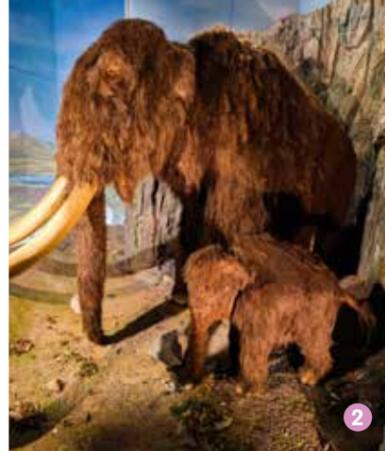
THE PROCESS OF CREATION

Beeswax is an ideal medium for replicating plants and flowers; it has life-like, translucent qualities, and can be warmed with a hair dryer then manipulated to make the sculpture appear more animated, says Annette. She uses varying widths of tin wire as the base for her sculptures, from the finest strips for plant roots to thick, almost unbendable lengths used to hold up larger, top-heavy pieces. To prevent the beeswax setting quickly, it's mixed with paraffin wax when melted. Then she adds powdered pigment before applying it to the wire



After years of working in a darkened museum, Annette designed her home-garden studio to maximise light and fresh air
BELOW Annette gently paints layers of green-coloured wax on to a wire stem, then uses the melted wax to adhere each petal





THE UK'S BEST NATURAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, taxidermy or casts were used to exhibit mammals and birds, while glass or wax models represented plants and microscopic organisms. Visit these remarkable artworks at natural history museums around the UK.

1 NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM, LONDON

World-famous for its dinosaur skeletons, astonishing collections of fossils and gemstones, awe-inspiring dioramas, plus life-size mammal models. nhm.ac.uk

2 NATIONAL MUSEUM CARDIFF, CARDIFF

Home to Wales's national art, geology and natural history collections, as well as the National Herbarium. museum.wales/Cardiff

3 NATIONAL MUSEUM OF SCOTLAND, EDINBURGH

See models of endangered species, plus an array of swimming and flying animals in the Wildlife Panorama. nms.ac.uk/national-museum-of-scotland/

4 OXFORD UNIVERSITY MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY, OXFORD

Come face to face with palaeontologist Mary Anning's ichthyosaur in this stunning building. oumnh.ox.ac.uk

5 KENDAL MUSEUM, CUMBRIA

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6 BOOTH MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY, BRIGHTON AND HOVE

A treasure trove of Victorian taxidermy and fossils, bones and skeletons. brightonmuseums.org.uk/booth-museum-of-natural-history/

7 GRANT MUSEUM OF ZOOLOGY, UCL, LONDON

Discover a fascinating collection of around 68,000 zoological specimens. ucl.ac.uk



Annette's delicate sculptures need to be kept cool and out of direct sunlight

with a fine brush, slowly building up layer after layer. "For things like petals and leaves I use tissue paper, which I dip into the wax; then you can cut it to the shape you want." Annette then paints on the finishing touches.

One sculpture can take more than a month to complete. I marvel at her quiet patience and tenacity. "I love the intricacy of it – it's just my thing," she laughs. "It's exactly what I love doing."

A VERY PERSONAL PROJECT

In synergy with her art, Annette's body, too, is supported with metal. Diagnosed with scoliosis as a teenager, she underwent surgery at the age of 14 to correct the curvature of her spine. Metal rods loop through her vertebrae, meaning her spine can't bend. Annette's favourite creation – a wax daisy-chain necklace with trailing roots, titled 'Creep' – is an intensely personal expression of both her experience with scoliosis and her connection with the natural world.

"It's about feeling like I'm a creep because of having something that disfigures me. There's a connection

with the idea of nature healing you, but it's quite tight and constricting as well, because there's a weird feeling at the moment that everything's kind of going wrong. There's a lot of emotion in the piece."

Annette says her feelings about her body being "imperfect" have led her to explore the idea of perfectionism in her art. Her sculptures often have a blemish – one decaying leaf, a withered petal – adding to their realism.

Her work is now exhibited in galleries across the world and sells to collectors for thousands of pounds. When I ask about her ultimate artistic goal, there's no hesitation. "I would love to have an exhibition at Kew. Because I work on collections and they all tell different stories, I would love it if I could have a solo exhibition where all those elements come together."

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Margaret Bartlett is the magazine's production editor and enjoys discovering the work of new artists and craftspeople across the UK.