



It's only natural

Jane Bevan's miniature masterpieces are fashioned from foraged materials, such as acorn cups, sycamore seeds and hawthorn twigs. **Natasha Goodfellow** meets the woman turning woodland finds into art

AT least once every autumn, there comes a day when artist Jane Bevan finds herself in a wood or a park, ankle deep in the brightest red and yellow leaves, wondering why she is on her own. 'It's such a beautiful sight—I can't understand why everyone else isn't there enjoying it, too,' she declares.

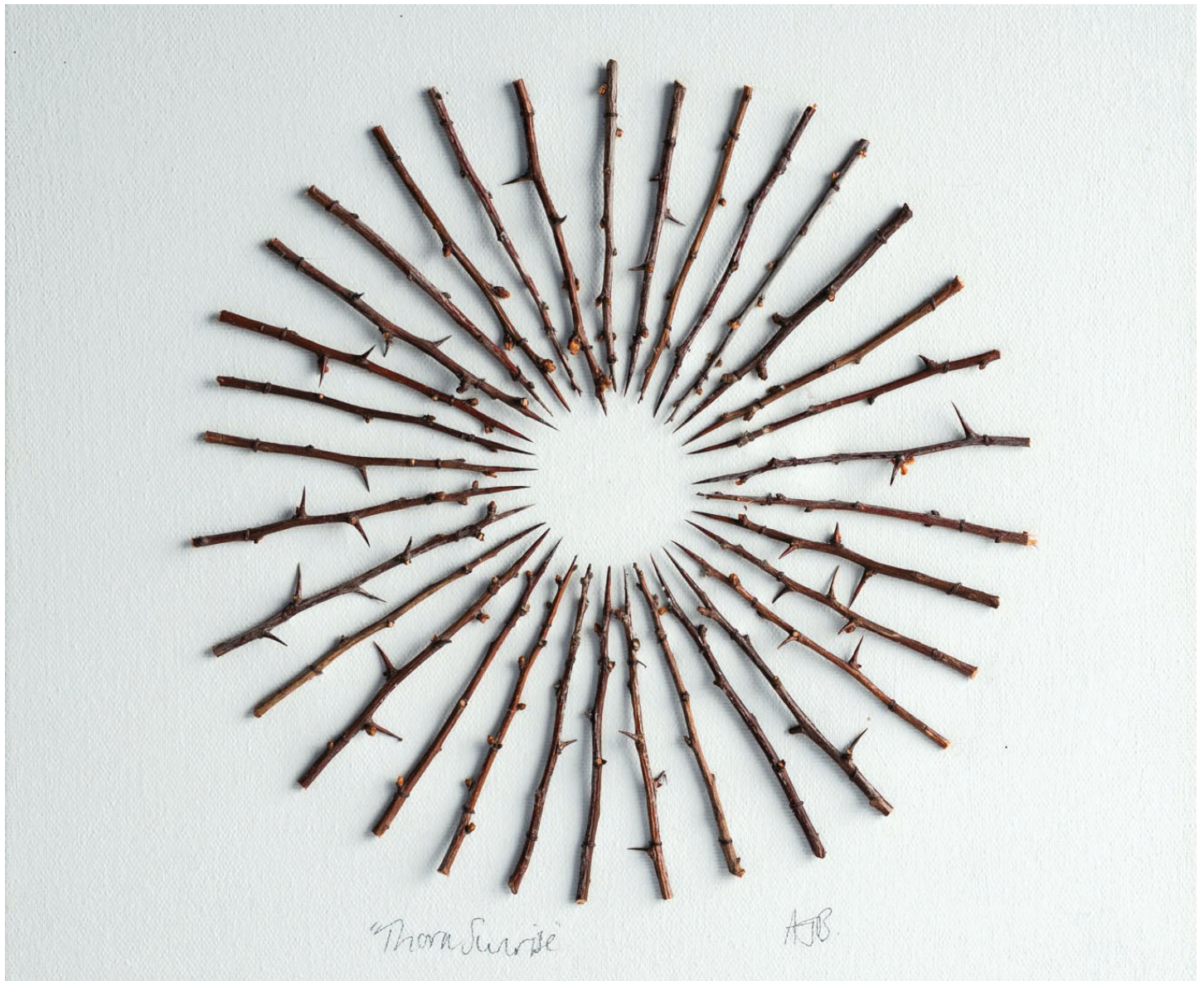
Ms Bevan, who is based near the ancient oak woodland around Calke Abbey, Derbyshire, has always had a special connection to forests. As a child growing up in Shrewsbury, Shropshire, she longed for the days

when she could get out in the woods to climb trees, build dens and imagine she was Robin Hood. 'I've always felt safe in woodlands and I love that golden light you get on sunny days,' she explains. Today, she appreciates them for other reasons, too: for the comfort and positivity a walk in the woods provides—and the bounty of materials she finds for her artwork. These include everything from acorn cups and sycamore seeds to pine needles or twigs of hawthorn or blackthorn, which are easier and less dangerous to forage in winter when the leaves have dropped.

Spring, when the birds are active, is the time to hunt for feathers and late summer is when she goes out into the surrounding fields looking for poppy or nigella seedheads at exactly the right stage of dryness. 'If they're too green, they'll never dry right,' she points out.

Some of her finds will be arranged into beautiful, minimal collages and stitched onto a canvas; others might be fashioned into a tiny ladder or basket, or a fanciful, bark-mounted insect. Many more will be made into perfectly composed, diminutive wall hangings—or 'wall jewellery', as she calls them—or used





Facing page: **Bark is the ideal material for crafting sculptural vessels, finds Jane Bevan.** *Above:* **Foraged finds stitched to canvas create the captivating *Thorn Sunrise*.** *Below left:* **The Derbyshire-based artist with Mouse.** *Below right:* **A 'quiet and gentle' Nature collage**

to adorn her sculptural bark vessels. Ms Bevan describes her work as 'quiet and gentle', but it also has poise and presence and repays keen attention. 'I like my pieces to look refined,' she says, adding that the silver-birch bark she uses is often mistaken for ceramic and feathers for silk. 'I find it really satisfying when people get up close and realise they recognise the materials, but that they're not what they thought.'

Although Ms Bevan has been a collector since her youth (buttons, miniature toy televisions, fruit stickers and snowdomes—600 and counting), she only really started noticing the natural beauty around her when, in 2009, following a long career in museum-arts programming, she enrolled onto the Craft BA at Derby University. 'We were encouraged to try everything, but, working with metal or ceramics, I always felt as if I was fighting the materials,' she admits. 'Whereas, as soon →





as I started experimenting with basketry and wood, it was as if the materials wanted to work together. I found it easier to create something interesting that people could connect to.'

She began by simply laying out her finds in patterns ('I do love a circle,' she laughs) and then, inspired by objects in some of her favourite museums (the Pitt Rivers and the British, to name but two) she built up from there, experimenting with different techniques—plaiting, stitching, coiling and weaving—and relishing the different properties of the materials she found. 'Bark is incredible,' she enthuses. 'It's almost like leather. You can cut it, you can stitch it, you can scratch patterns

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into or draw onto it. You can wax it and make it shine. It's so warm looking, and it doesn't tear very easily.' Silver-birch bark can be steamed over a kettle or in hot water and then bent to shape—which it will hold forever once dried. Eucalyptus bark, with its lovely scent, goes completely flat on contact with hot water, meaning it can be cut with scissors. And cherry bark, although very brittle and more difficult to stitch, has an intense metallic sheen that Ms Bevan finds hard to resist.

Unlike many of the other materials she employs, bark of a usable thickness and size does not tend to present itself for easy foraging—quite the contrary. It is most likely to be found on a tree trunk that has been lying dead for



Above: Ms Bevan forages for silver-birch bark. Left, from top: Some of her creations: an insect fashioned from a mix of materials; a wall-hanging piece; and a fanciful insect

years, 'very possibly in a muddy lake or some other hard-to-reach spot,' Ms Bevan chuckles, ruefully. 'To get a long strip, you have to roll the trunk or lift it to be able to get underneath it and you really need a proper saw. If you do manage to cut a piece of wood, you then need to carry it back home—and then you have to go back and get another. It can take days to collect enough, but, when you do find something really good, it's the best feeling.'

The difficulties of finding large bits of bark dictate the small scale of her work, just as the ease of finding other materials and the low-tech nature of her approach enables her to run workshops encouraging others to look more closely at the world around them. These are held both privately and in hospitals and other health settings: although part of the aim is to make something beautiful or resonant, it is as much about companionship and connecting to Nature in its broadest sense. 'For those who are unable to get outside, simply talking about a few choice natural finds can help unlock memories and be deeply healing,' she notes.

Where possible, however, she always takes the group outdoors. 'You don't need to go for a walk or a run. You simply need to go out into Nature and actually look at it, touch it and breathe it all in. If you can do that for even a few minutes, you will always feel better.'

Jane Bevan will be exhibiting at Beautiful & Useful at the Garden Museum, London SW3, on December 3, and will run a 'Create with Nature' workshop at her home in Ticknall, Derbyshire, on December 9. For more details, visit www.janebevan.co.uk